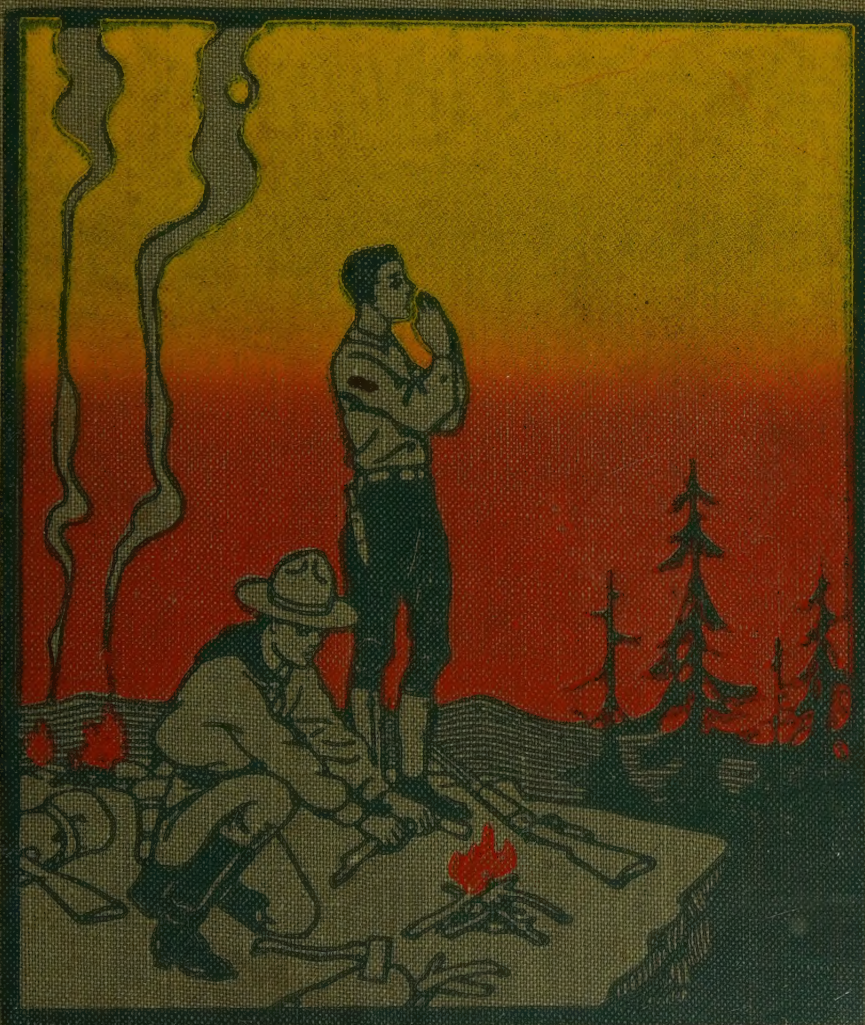


THE LONG TRAIL BOYS *and* THE MYSTERY OF THE UNKNOWN MESSENGER



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Neil F. Mahaney.

To Dr.

from

Dorothy

THE LONG TRAIL SERIES

THE LONG TRAIL BOYS
AND THE
MYSTERY OF THE
UNKNOWN MESSENGER



THE FACE OF THE NIGHT RIDER WAS LIKE NOTHING HUMAN
(See page 232)

THE LONG TRAIL SERIES

THE
LONG TRAIL BOYS
AND THE
MYSTERY OF THE
UNKNOWN MESSENGER

BY
DALE WILKINS

ILLUSTRATED BY
JEAN OLDHAM



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Long Trail—Unknown Messenger

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CHAPTER I

A SHOCK PUNCH AT SUN-UP

“**S**LOW down ahead there for a stop! We’re coming to the Pass.” Hal Brent’s jubilantly shouted announcement held in it a note of relief. His elated yell brought the little band of horsemen to a gradual stop on the rough mountain trail. The group let loose a buoyant burst of cheers.

“Naw,” came in decided but guttural tones from a squat figure in buckskins hunched far over the saddle.

“I’ll bet you a new high hat it is, S. B. Aren’t you a bear, though, to ‘Naw’ me like that? Leave it to Little Brent to know where he is.” Hal defended himself in his usual light-hearted fashion.

“Yes; leave it to Little Brent, and watch the gang get lost,” jeered George Davis. “He’s no trail hound.”

“Naw,” repeated Shy Beaver with intent to tease Hal. “You don’t know Pass, Little Brent. You give me new high hat, anyway.”

“Sure I will. Step on my neck again. I like it,” Hal retorted. Opening his mouth to

its widest extent, he sent a ringing call of "Craig, hey, Craig," echoing upon the still mountain air.

"Pleasant Brave no hear. Too much yell for nothin'." Shy Beaver slowly straightened in the saddle, regarding noisy Hal with a tolerant grin.

"Squash! Flop goes Hal's reputation as a woodsman!" Hal brought one hand smartly down upon the other in a gesture of comic collapse.

"Just the same it looks like a pass," said Kent Sherwood as he peered sharply ahead down the trail at what seemed to be the opening into a rock-bound pass.

"Naw. No pass today. Mebbe no to-morrow," was the Indian's dampening assertion.

"Oh, very well. You win," Hall flipped back lightly.

"Aren't you a joy robber though, S. B.?" chimed in George Davis.

"You certainly know how to put the kibosh on hope," grumbled David Whitney.

"Mebbe." Shy Beaver's grin broke out anew, and broader. He thoroughly enjoyed being "kidded" by the Long Trail Boys.

"Where's Craig? That's what's bothering

me. He was to meet us at Francisco Pass on the tenth of July. Today's the tenth. Since this isn't the Pass, where is it, S. B.?" David asked concernedly.

"We find," Shy Beaver assured him stolidly.

"*Verdad* (true). It is no pass." Antonio Valdez had ridden ahead to the rocky formation. He now called back over one shoulder: "*Venga* (come on). It is no pass. Only the big rocks standing high give it that look." He rode Hidalgo, his cream-colored pony, past the rock pile at one side of the trail. Next moment he had disappeared from his comrades' view, as a result of a sharp drop in the trail.

"Attaboy!" sang out Kent, next to follow the Mexican. The others clattered down the steep incline behind him, following the trail again at the foot of the declivity as it wound around the mountain, then rose steeply above the trail on the left, with a sheer drop of several hundred feet on the right.

"Hey, Mejicano! Do you know where you're going?" Hal yelled in a mock-worried tone as Antonio continued to take the lead.

"Si, señor," floated derisively back from Antonio.

The party rode after him, single file now, for the trail had narrowed.

"*Hola* (Aha)!" Antonio sent a ringing shout back to his companions. He had suddenly rounded an unexpected curve in the rough trail and come upon a good-sized bluff. It jutted out over the drop on the left of the trail for a distance of perhaps sixty or seventy feet.

"Oh, mamma, it looks good to me!" Hal was first to reach Antonio. "This place was made for the especial benefit of the Long Trail gang, I'll say. A good open camp site with trees enough at the edge of this jumping-off place to prevent any accidental bounds, leaps or jumps over the brink."

Hal had already sprung from Starlight's back and was standing among the low bushes beside the animal. "How about it, Norton? Does this look like camp?"

"It certainly does," emphasized the guide. "It's the first likely site I've seen since we started out this morning. Besides, it's time to make camp."

"Think we're in for a thunder storm to-night?" Kent asked, nodding toward the west.

"Those clouds look like it." Norton cast

an appraising glance at the ominous bank of purplish black clouds behind which the sun, red and sullen, was slowly preparing to drop. "I'm going to get busy right now and put up a lean-to. There's no sign of a natural shelter here."

"That means go rustle wood for Boss Norton," George proclaimed cheerfully. "Go to it, fellows."

"And what will you be doing?" Antonio innocently inquired.

"In the absence of our esteemed fren', Gam Fu, I shall cook supper." George beamed confidently at the Mexican.

"*Ay, mi madre* (Oh, my mother)!" Up went Tony's hands in despair.

"*Good night*," groaned Hal.

"Not yet." David fixed a determined eye upon grinning George.

"Don't you want us to live to see Craig?" Kent demanded.

"No, siree." Laughing, Norton promptly vetoed George's proposal. "We've no supplies to waste."

"Saved." Kent pretended to collapse with relief.

Amid this flow of good-humored "joshing" the riders were busying themselves with over-

hauling their knapsacks. Eats for the day had been divided among the boys at sun-up. Owing to the fact that the Long Trail outfit would not begin their real trip into the wilds until after their meeting with Craig, they were traveling "light." They had had their horses shipped by special train and had come by train themselves to Tucson, Arizona. They had there stocked up with such supplies as could be carried without the aid of burros, with the expectation of meeting Craig at Francisco Pass at the end of a week's journey southeast from Tucson.

From there they were to go to Melrose, a lively border town, where Craig was to secure the necessary burros and supplies for the longer expedition they purposed to make, following the Rio Grande River.

"Stand and deliver," ordered George, ignoring his unpopularity as cook.

"Not so you could notice it." David chuckled as he fished a pack of potato chips from his knapsack and handed it to Hal.

Bump, bump. A can of tomatoes and another of peaches landed perilously near Hal's feet. This was George's contribution.

"Hey, you wild man! Back to the woods," Hal sang out, laughing.

"Here is the bacon, *hermano* (brother), and the coffee." Tony handed them to Hal.

"And here's the sugar and the canned cow," added Kent.

"Who has the flour?" Hal glanced inquiringly about him. "I'm going to do the biscuit act. Leave the supper to me. The rest of you can work for Boss Norton. You may call me Gam Fu, if you like."

"Go to it, boy." Norton surveyed Hal indulgently, his keen gray eyes full of amusement.

"Oh, very well. I didn't want to cook grub for this roughneck bunch anyway," George said airily. "Lead me to the wood pile."

"There's plenty of dry wood down near the edge of the bluff." Norton had already headed in that direction. "Look out for rattlers."

The guide never failed to sound this warning when his charges were about to make camp on a new site. He had trained them to his own cautious method of energetically beating up every foot of the ground immediate to the camp. Not infrequently during their pony-back summer trips over the great West they had stirred up and speedily dispatched

these venomous pests within their camp limits.

Four summers of trailing pony-back through the wilds had made thorough woodsmen of the five youngsters who had named themselves the Long Trail Boys after their first summer of fun and adventure in the Nevada mountains. "The Long Trail Boys at Sweet Water Ranch" told the story of this expedition. "The Long Trail Boys and the Gray Cloaks" gave an account of their travels through the Oregon forests. "The Long Trail Boys and the Scarlet Sign" recorded the mysterious happenings of a second expedition in the Nevada wilds. "The Long Trail Boys and the Vanishing Rider" told of their strange and thrilling adventures in Mexico.

A year had passed since their memorable expedition across the Mexican border. Hal and Kent had now finished their college course at Yale University. David and Antonio had also completed special courses respectively at Stanford University. George was now manager of a department in Mr. Brent's Carson City offices.

With Hal's return from Yale, where, in his own slangy vernacular, he and Kent had "pulled down a few honors," he had eagerly

begun agitating the subject of the Long Trail Boys' usual summer jaunt. Hartwell Craig's ownership of a large tract of wild land in southwestern Texas had furnished them with a new summer hunting ground.

Early in the spring Craig had decided to visit the Texas territory which he had purchased ten years previously. If it promised good hunting and fishing it would then furnish the Long Trailers with a summer playground. White Shadow, the Yaqui chief, and Gam Fu, both of Long Trail fame, had accompanied the ranchman on the journey. It was now early July and the outfit was, according to Norton's reckoning, near Francisco Pass, their objective. Craig had written Norton specific directions for finding the Pass. Moreover, Shy Beaver, the Navajo chief, nomad woodsman that he was, had declared that he knew the exact location of the Pass.

Glad of the exercise of wood gathering after a long day in the saddle, the boys went to their task with their usual pell-mell energy. Long before day had merged into twilight the lean-to was ready, supper had been eaten, and the party were following their usual custom of lounging about the camp fire.

"How many times have you been over this

part of the map, S. B.?" Recumbent, Hal raised himself upon his elbows thus to address the Navajo, who sat humped up on the other side of the blaze, arms about his knees.

"Mebbe six, seven," grunted Shy Beaver. "Me no like."

"You don't!" Hal sat up with a surprised jerk. "Now you have said something. What's wrong with it? You ought to know, if anyone."

"No good. Too many sheepmen. Too many cattlemen. Fight all time. Hide in bushes. Shoot anybody. Mebbe now——"

"Oh, gee, what a lovely prospect!" George interrupted with flippant enthusiasm. The flash in his eyes, reflected in those of his pals, showed rising interest in such an exciting situation.

"When do we hit the ranges, S. B., and line up for the porous work?" Kent asked jestingly. "You've certainly kept mum about it up to now."

"You and George talk too quick. Me no trail here four, mebbe five year. Think mebbe all right now. Pleasant Brave no tell what I tell you when he write. Mebbe no more fights. Little Brent's father no like you boys have gun fights."

"Leave it to Craig to find out the lay of his land," Hal said confidently. "He's been a ranchman too many years not to know the signs of such scrapping. He'd have written us about it."

"Mebbe no more fights." Shy Beaver rose with a curious air of dignity that characterized him at times. He folded his bright Navajo blanket about him and stalked away toward the lean-to. When there was nothing of excitement going on in camp the old man favored an early bedtime. He was also in favor of the lean-to when rain was in prospect. Used to exposure in all sorts of weather, he nevertheless took very kindly to such camping comforts as the Long Trailers were able to muster.

"What's stirring in his nut?" Hal gazed reflectively after the Navajo.

"He's evidently down on this part of the map for reasons of his own," Norton said. "They must be good ones. It's not like him to care a hoot about a sheepman and cattleman's war."

"Probably he got all fed up with it. Found he couldn't turn around without some scrapper pinging at him just for practice. They say sheepmen and cattlemen don't care a hang

who gets pinged when they start on the war-path," commented Kent.

"Did your father ever have any gun fights with cattlemen?" David asked Hal curiously.

"No, nor my grandfather, Brent II; but my great-granddaddy, Brent I, had his own troubles with supposed cattlemen who were rustlers. Believe me, the old-time rustlers were some tough nuts. They shot up folks for pure sport. My father is so square he's liked all over the state of Nevada, even by cattlemen. Old Sweet Water's plenty large enough for our sheep. No sheep of ours has ever strayed a foot off it. Of course, what gets the cattlemen's goat is the fact that sheep will grab every blade of grass growing if you give 'em the chance."

"Si," nodded Antonio. "It is the disgrace in the eyes of the cowboys to be a shepherd. Most cattlemen hate the sheepmen, but few cattlemen in Nevada hate your father. He is the great exception." A smile of boyish worship lighted the Mexican's clear-cut dark features. As John Brent's protégé, Antonio was devoted heart and soul to the kindly ranchman in whose employ he was.

"S. B. has the right dope," Hal finally yawned, following a little further discussion

among them concerning the deep-seated enmity existing between sheepmen and cattlemen. "It's time for Hal to go by-by. I worked twice as hard as the rest of you fellows building the lean-to."

"He's dreaming already. Give him a punch, Mejicano, and wake him up," George threw across the camp fire to Antonio.

"No shock punches allowed." Hal sprang up from the fire with alacrity.

"Better beat it then," Kent laughingly threatened. "We owe you a few for putting us at the foot of the work class. How'll you have 'em—one man power, or in bunches?"

"Good night." Hal was already halfway to the lean-to as he called back mockingly over his shoulder.

David was next to desert the camp fire, and Kent soon followed him. Antonio and Norton came last, it being their turn to patrol camp. This was one task which fell nightly to two of the outfit just before turning in. While the Long Trailers could usually spend long days in the saddle without growing tired the unusual roughness of the mountain trails they had ridden that day had prepared them for an early turning-in. Within twenty minutes after Hal had rolled up in his blanket the outfit were with him, and sleeping.

Norton's prediction of rain was verified. Toward morning the dense darkness of the last hour before dawn became fitfully illuminated by jagged orange flashes, accompanied by the boom and crack of thunder. Followed a short but heavy shower which did not bother the sleeping outfit in their snug water-tight retreat. Mountain storms were nothing new to the campers, and Norton's lean-tos were always "sure-enough" shelters.

Before daylight the rain had entirely ceased. Hal opened his eyes upon the first pale rays of a rain-washed dawn. He awoke suddenly, and with that odd sense of alarm which he had learned by experience to associate with near-by danger, or at least the stirring of something unusual. He could just distinguish his comrades in the slowly growing morning light.

A glance at them and Hal was up and alert and slipping noiselessly out of the lean-to on moccasined feet. In that one quick glance he had failed to pick up the gaily blanketed form of the Navajo chief.

"Ducked out of here the minute the rain stopped," Hal surmised. He decided that it might have been Shy Beaver's exit from the lean-to that had awakened him. Then he changed his mind. "Nope," he said under

his breath. "There's more than S. B. stirring. He picked something out of the air before I did, and went after it."

He paused for an instant as he came to the more thickly wooded portion of the rocky bluff. He had slipped his cartridge belt on turning in, but he carried a small thirty-two caliber revolver in a trousers pocket. Now it was in his hand as he cautiously advanced toward the tall ranks of pines and spruces.

Excitement gripped him as he glimpsed a moving figure slipping in and out among the trees. Darting toward the dodging form, he checked a half-vexed exclamation. The figure ahead was that of old Shy Beaver, minus his blanket. Hal made a soundless bee line for the Indian.

"How?" he breathed in the Navajo's ear, delighted at having taken the old chief by surprise.

Shy Beaver stifled an amazed "Ugh!" A faint smile overspread his stolid face. Then he took Hal by an arm and walked him forward a few steps. Silently he pointed through the trees.

Hal's eager eyes followed the indexing brown finger. In the graying dawn he could see two tall forms locked together in a savage struggle.

Back and forth the two lithe figures swayed, fighting with the ferocity of wild beasts.

"In the name of Pete, what's being pulled off here?" muttered Hal in the Navajo's ear.

CHAPTER II

THE NEVADA HASH HOISTER

WATCHING the fiercely fighting pair, Hal and Shy Beaver quickly came to the opinion that the struggle would be to the death. One of the fighters, a towering, raw-boned man, was bent on backing his adversary off the bluff. The other was striving desperately to break away from the relentless force which was slowly backing him to his certain death. He was as tall as his antagonist, but more slender of build. He moved with incredible quickness, but his adversary seemed to have the advantage in sheer brute strength. In spite of the lithe, pantherish suppleness of the one contestant, brute strength now had the upper hand.

"Ugh! Big fight. One try to kill other," Shy Beaver muttered in Hal's ear.

"Then it's up to us to butt in and prevent a killing," Hal said guardedly. "Blamed if I'll stand here and—Great guns!" One of Hal's hands fastened upon Shy Beaver's shoulder in a close grip.

It was over before Hal and the Navajo had

more than started for the fighters at a run. With a sudden excess of furious strength the raw-boned man had torn himself free from his opponent, then given him a violent shove backward. Taken off his balance, the doomed man had made two or three staggering, uncertain steps backward, then with a hoarse cry had suddenly disappeared.

"*Judas Priest!*" Hal let out a yell of sheer horror. "Hey, you killer. Stand where you are." Quick as a flash he brought his revolver into play.

For an instant he glimpsed the tall, powerful bulk of the murderer as he turned from the bluff's edge. Hal had not time to look him over. The fellow whirled, making a lightning sideways dash through a pine thicket as he darted onward toward the trail.

Tempted to send two shots after the fugitive, Hal nevertheless held his fire. Instead he gave pursuit in his usual breakneck fashion, stubbornly bent on the big fellow's capture.

"No go, no go, Hal," Shy Beaver called anxiously after him. But Hal kept on going.

To his disgust, he lost sight of his quarry before the fellow had run a hundred yards. He saw him strike the trail, cross it, and dis-

appear in the bushes above the rocky path. He had managed to make at least a partial get-away. The sudden hum of a bullet, whizzing uncomfortably close to Hal's right ear was signal proof that the fellow was still lurking in the immediate vicinity. Following the first shot, half a dozen bullets pattered about Hal. Then the bullet shower stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

"You hurt?" Shy Beaver had come tearing through the woods to Hal, unmindful of the prospect of a second fusillade of lead. Since Hal had not heeded his advice Shy Beaver could only follow Little Brent's lead.

"Naw." Hal surveyed the Indian with a half smile. He knew Shy Beaver to be thoroughly devoted to him. "But what about the fellow that was bumped off the bluff?" Hal's face instantly sobered. "He had a thousand-foot drop ahead of him. Great guns! It gives me a jolt even to think of it. No use looking over the edge for him. He's a goner."

Sounds of voices from the direction of the lean-to indicated the rest of the outfit as up and stirring. A ringing halloo from camp, which Hal threw back instantly, brought the others speeding toward them.

"*Que hay, hermano* (what is the matter, brother)?" saluted Antonio, first to reach Hal and the Navajo. "We heard the shots," he cried with excited concern.

"But Hal is still unperforated. A great big raw-boned guy with some murderous disposition had just finished shoving one fellow off the face of the earth when he saw me and got busy trying to shoot me off it, too."

"*Mi madre!* Of what do you talk?" A hand on Hal's shoulder, Tony's lips were smiling, but his dark eyes burned with startled interest. He had been first to discover that Hal and Shy Beaver were missing and had immediately connected their absence from the lean-to with the unusual.

"You'll know in a minute, Tonums. Hey, you gang, listen to me," Hal called out above the babel of questions which his comrades hurled at him. He described the tragic incident of the gray dawn in his vivid if slangy speech.

"Leave it to you to pick all the big adventures," George mourned.

"You certainly stole a march on me." Norton was looking rather sheepish. "I was so doggone tired last night I slept like a log. Shy Beaver's spoiled me on this trip by being

too good a scout. I've come to depend on him. It looks that way."

"Naw." The old chief objected disgustingly. "Little Father like Indian. He hear all right. No depend nothin'."

"Much obliged, S. B. That let's me out of being asleep at the switch this time," laughed Norton. "'No depend nothin' is going to be my motto, hereafter."

"Come on over where it happened!" George waved an arm in a beckoning sweep and started for the edge of the bluff, the rest of the outfit running at his heels.

"Gee whiliken, what a drop!" Kent gave an involuntary shudder as he turned from a downward look that had made him dizzy, seasoned woodsman though he now was.

Directly below the bluff edge, broken, craggy cliffs, sparsely wooded with dwarf cedars, jutted out raggedly from the precipitous mountain side. The gnarled, misshapen cedars growing out of yellow crumbling rock possessed a weird quality of their own. It was as if they had been set there by ancient gnomes and hobgoblins. In among the cliffs cedared slopes stretched down into forest-choked ravines and narrow-topped canyons merged greenly into one another.

"The fellow who went backward over the edge fought like a man, but the one who put him there was a wild beast. Talk about a mad tiger! His upper lip was drawn back from his teeth and he was snarling like one. The other fellow never made a sound. He just fought to pull himself away from Tigerface. I'll bet you Tigerface began the row. Probably he trailed the other fellow here, and then jumped him." This was Hal's narration and opinion of the tragedy.

"Tigerface," Kent repeated reflectively. "That's almost as good as Hawknose."

By "Hawknose" Kent referred to the East Indian bandit, el Halcon, who had long terrorized northern Mexico, and in whose capture the Long Trail Boys had played a leading part during their third summer pony-back trip through Nevada. There, close to Emerald Valley, White Shadow's secret stronghold, they had crossed the trail of el Halcon and solved the mystery of the Scarlet Sign. It was George who had waggishly renamed el Halcon "old Hawknose."

"He must belong to the bandits' union. He seems to know all the high signs from downright killing to porous practice," David observed sarcastically.

"Bad medicine. Texan. Rustler." Shy Beaver offered succinct information.

"By George! You've said it, S. B. He's the real type of Texan bad man!" Hal exclaimed. "Now and then, one or another of these Texans has hooked up at Sweet Water. They've never lasted long, nor waited to be fired. They've always started something and had to get out at a gallop."

"When I was the *niño* (little boy) one of these Texans killed a shepherd out on the range of the Manzanita Ranch where I was a sheep *niño*. This shepherd was an old man named Salus. He carried his money always about with him in little bags. He was known to be the miser. I saw him die."

"And is that all you're going to tell us about it?" Hal demanded jocularly as Antonio lapsed into silence, an absent look in his great dark eyes.

"Yes, I should say so. Start a story, and then leave off at the beginning of it," George promptly added.

"It was terrible to me then." Antonio shook a reminiscent head. "I was quite far away from old Salus on a little hill when I saw a man on a big brown horse riding the range toward Salus. Even in the saddle he looked

so tall that I knew where I had seen him before. It was at a *fiesta* (festival) at the Jacinto Ranch. He was the rider on that ranch and he was *malo*, *muy malo* (bad, very bad). My cousin who worked on the Jacinto, too, said he was the *Americano malo* from Texas. I remember when I saw him riding toward Salus I felt afraid. He rode fast and when he came near Salus he pulled a revolver from his hip pocket and shot old Salus. I saw a fiery flash and heard the crack of the gun. Poor Salus threw up his arms and fell on his face in the grass." Unconsciously Antonio dramatically gestured out the story.

"I did not know what to do, but I ran toward Salus, yelling as loudly as I could. The fellow was off his horse then and bending over Salus. I knew he was hunting for the money bags, and I kept on yelling and running toward him."

"It's a wonder he didn't draw on you," Kent commented.

"*Verdad.*" Antonio shrugged his broad shoulders. "He found the gold bags in one minute and the next was back on his horse, riding away. He did not look toward me once. I was but the *niño* Mejicano, and not

worth one shot. So he must have thought. When I came to Salus, he was dead with a bullet through his heart. The robber had taken Salus's revolver from the holster. I wished then to be a man with a revolver. I would have shot the robber. Now I should not care so much to kill a man," Tony ended with a short laugh.

"Some story, Tonums. My idea of a pleasant pastime is not shooting somebody up. But watch me speed a hot shot at that Texas rattler if we ever run into him again on the trail and he gets careless with his gun," Hal vowed vengefully.

"A bad border Texan is the limit," Norton agreed. "I've run against a few such fellows in my travels. I never met but one Texan that was a thoroughbred."

"This is the wrong end of the day for a camp-fire yarn," David lightly told his uncle.

"What's that?" Norton had been walking along the edge of the bluff, his keen eyes roving from point to point of the precipitous mountain side. "Oh, there isn't so much to tell of this Tex I knew, except that he was thoroughbred to the bone. And yet he had a mystery hanging over him. Well, it might make a good camp-fire yarn. "

■

This was as good as a promise that the yarn would be forthcoming that evening. Norton's tales of his own adventures in the West, as well as the strange and exciting tales he knew of the adventures of others, were a keen delight to the Long Trail Boys. To get Norton started on one of these "toppo" tales was not always easy. He told camp-fire stories only when the spirit moved him. This was by no means every night.

"It certainly will if the weather behaves. Much oblige Boss Norton. Thanking you in advance, etc.," Hal said effusively.

"See what night brings." Norton had now shifted his gaze from the steeps below him to the sky. He was sweeping the horizon alertly for storm signals.

"What's stirring?" Kent had infinite respect for Norton's weather predictions. They rarely failed.

"There's wind in those clouds. It may pass us by. Still, it looks and feels to me as though we were in for a tree-snapping blow with thunder and lightning. Hard to say whether there'll be much rain."

"Then we are best off to stay here, Señor Norton," Antonio suggested. "We have the lean-to, and it is the strongest one we ever

put up. No rain came into it last night. Trees are everywhere. "We are as safe from them here, if they should fall, as any other place on the trail unless we are in the open."

"Oh, shoe strings, apple sauce, June bugs," grumbled Hal. "*Callese* (keep quiet), Meji-cano. Don't put such ideas into Boss Norton's head. What about Craig? He's probably at Francisco Pass by now, wondering what has nabbed that famous organization, the Long Trail Boys. Maybe there won't be any storm. The sky may be throwing a big bluff, and the storm may chase itself off to Mexico. The sun's registering, O.K. See." He nodded toward the sun coming up in a huge, flaming, red ball from low-lying gray clouds.

"I'm with Tony about staying here," Norton replied. "But it's up to you fellows. Better put it to vote," he added laughingly.

"Oh, see here, Norton. Have a heart. Why not start on our way? We can tell a good while beforehand just about when the storm is going to hit us. Then we can put up a lean-to, pronto, dodge a ducking, and be that much nearer to the Pass."

"Naw. Little Father right. Stay here. Good lean-to. You go trail, me stay here.

No like get wet." Shy Beaver now lifted a voice in the discussion.

"Who told you to go back on your benefactor and hatter?" Hal demanded in a tone of such ridiculous injury that the outfit roared.

"Me no care." Shy Beaver was trying to look sober. Possessing the usual grim stolidity of the Indian, he was never proof, however, against lively Hal's sallies.

"*All right for you,*" Hal flung back reproachfully.

"Let's stick around here today and see if we can bag a little game. I've seen plenty of quail and partridge, and I thought I saw a couple of wild turkeys. Turkey will do for us for supper tonight. Eh, Norton?" Kent turned to the guide.

"I hope so," was the reply.

"Oh, never mind Hal. He won't care," Hal assured the empty air in affable tones. "Go as far as you like. No, I mean don't dare go a step."

Hal accepted Norton's preference of plan in his usual sweet-tempered fashion.

"We ought to make it a man hunt and beat up the woods around camp. The killer may not be far from here." George was seized with this not unlikely idea.

"No man hunts for this aggregation."

Norton spoke with decision. "We're under promise to meet Craig at the Pass at a certain time. We don't know the inside details of this fight Hal saw. Murder is murder, anywhere one may go. Still, we can't fly off at a tangent on a man hunt. It's not our business just now. But we can keep a lookout as we go for this murderous Tex."

Skirting the partially tree-grown edge of the bluff, the boys made a final searching eye survey of the wilderness below them. There were rocks, fissures, trees, twisted and ancient, growing out of yellowed rocky masses, brawling little streams and foaming cascades, clumps of deep green forests—that was all they could pick up, even with Hal's glasses, which he had hurried to his knapsack to secure.

"It's worse than trying to find a needle in a haystack." Norton sprang up from the rocky ground, where he had dropped face downward for a last sweeping survey of the wild panorama below. "There's always one chance in a thousand, though, that a man can save himself in a fall like that by catching hold of a bush or a tree, or by landing on a ledge."

"I guess it's story-book fellows who do that mostly," Kent said with a skeptical chuckle.

"They do in real life occasionally," Norton

retorted. "A fall down a mountain side isn't like pitching out the forty-fifth story window of one of your New York skyscrapers. *Then you are on the way to your own funeral.*"

"It's a good thing, Hal, you didn't try to butt into the fight. Glad it's not you we've been trying to locate." The guide's tones held relief.

"It was all over before I could get there," Hal admitted, "or I'd have tried to take a hand in it, I guess. I don't know."

'If Tigerface was as big as you thought he was, he'd have tossed you into space, pronto. Zip! Whir-r-r! Good night, Little Brent." George went through a pantomime of tossing something over the brink with one hand.

"Is that so?" Hal's horror of the daybreak tragedy he had lately witnessed vanished before George's grinning derision. One vengeful bound at his traducer, and George was speeding madly to camp with Hal, bent on punishment, at his heels. He dashed into the lean-to, reappearing instantly armed with the big enamel coffee pot and the iron frying pan.

"Don't rough-house the cook!" he shouted, deftly using the pan to ward off the grab Hal made at him. "I'm the new breakfast getter, George Fu, the Nevada Hash Hoister."

CHAPTER III

THE CRY ABOVE THE WIND

“**T**HE Nevada Bluff Hoister, you ought to say.” Hal pounced upon George and the two had a friendly tussle for the frying pan. George had already cast aside the coffee pot as impending victory. They crashed against Kent and David, who were just coming up to them, and Hal jeeringly proclaimed George’s latest amazing announcement.

“Uh-h-h-h!” Kent pretended to collapse.

“I can’t see you for a minute.” David also began to show threatening signs toward the new cook.

“So sorry.” Hal, having relaxed his grip upon George, the latter broke away and darted into the lean-to again. Next second he emerged with a familiar lacquered box under one arm.

“Grab him. He’s got the sugar box,” cried Kent.

George made a long grasshopper-like leap out of the way of his would-be captors. “No sugee if you don’t let me cookee,” he threatened.

"Why are you so crazy to poison the outfit?" Kent asked him.

"I'm not." George continued to insure immunity by 'a new series of nimble jumps. "Don't yip until you've been poisoned. Wait and see what Georgie Fu can do. You'll be surprised—if you live long enough," he tacked on satirically.

"Oh, go to it. I'd rather be poisoned than have coffee without sugar. And he's mean enough to hide the sugar. He's what you call a no-good Nevadan." Hal affected great weariness. "Come on, fellows. Let him struggle with the eats for a while. If he harms the hash we'll hunt up a water hole and duck him in it."

"*Harm the hash!* I like your nerve. Skidoo, all of you. This is George Fu's busy morning. You may all keep your distance from me except Mejicano. He hasn't called me names and razzed me. Besides, I need him for an assistant," George added importantly as he made a wary advance toward the lean-to.

"So I am to be Tony Fu, the assistant. That means I shall have to do most of the work," Tony commented drolly.

"Get it straight, Mr. G. Fu. This outfit

is hungry. We're way behind our breakfast schedule now," Norton reminded frisky George.

"Hungry!" the outfit roared in dismal unison. Then a chorus of reproachful yells ascended. Even Shy Beaver helped to rag the new cook.

"Go starve half an hour longer and chop chop will be ready. Now, Shoo! Vamos! Skidoo! Beat it!" George chased away his rollicking companions with wild flappings of his long arms.

It was exactly half an hour afterward when he sent out the welcome call of: "Comee getee. Comee getee," to his ravenous companions, made more ravenous by sundry fragrant scents of cooking which had assailed their nostrils.

"Jupiter Ammon!" Hal sent up a cry of pretended amazement as the willing outfit bundled themselves into place around the blue and white oilcloth square which the outfit carried as a table cloth. George was seen coming toward them carrying a great, round golden cake. He bowed himself over, depositing the cake in the middle of the oilcloth with many ridiculous flourishes.

"What do you call it?" Kent shaded his

eyes as though dazzled by a sight of the big golden cake.

"Corn cake," Norton called out. "I smelled it baking. I thought Tony was making tortillas."

"Naw!" George put on a Shy Beaver expression. He shouted above the babel of hilarious voices: "Let this soak in, you guys. I stirred up something, and there it is." He leveled a proud finger at the corn cake. "Go ahead. Abuse me some more. Tell me what a flivver I am in the chuck department," he invited challengingly.

"Let him rave. Never believe he baked it," counseled Kent, laughing.

"When did *you* ever get hep to a cook oven?" Hal fixed his eyes on George with a stern semblance of suspicion as the new cook dropped down into place opposite him.

"You can't always sometimes tell." David also stared unbelievably at George, then dubiously at the corn cake.

"No, that's so," Kent agreed with teasing stress.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating, you know," Hal insinuated.

"Don't eat it." George remained pleasant as a midsummer breeze. "There's only

enough of it, anyhow, for Mejicano and me."

"I *guess not*." David made a swift descent upon the corn cake. He captured it and slid it across the oilcloth to Norton, who promptly cut it into medium-sized squares with his hunting knife.

Meanwhile Antonio distributed crisp slices of bacon upon the boys' granite-ware plates and filled their folding metal cups with hot coffee.

"There, you have enough to eat for breakfast," he laughed as he dumped a pile of big waxy ginger cookies from a box to the oilcloth.

"Gam wised you how to make corn bread," was Kent's view of the miracle.

"Nope-ee, *nunca* (never)," George denied strenuously. He helped himself to four ginger cookies and demanded another cup of coffee from Kent, who had taken charge of the coffee pot.

"Tony stirred up the batter. All you did was dump it in the pan. Anyone could do that," David declared tantalizingly.

His comrades continued to tease George after the toothsome product of his unbelievable culinary skill had been eaten to the last crumb.

"You may bake one again tomorrow. I'll bet you you can't," Hal challenged.

"Tomorrow. Day after tomorrow. Any old day. Georgie Fu knows a thing or two," George boasted airily.

"Hurrah for Georgie Fu!" cheered Kent in a high, piping voice.

The others took up the high, squealing cheer and kept it going, more for the sake of making a noise than in honor of George. They ended with the Long Trail yell, which they gave with their usual uproarious abandon.

"There you go," George said disgustedly when he could make himself heard. "You can yell your heads off on the Long Trail burst of yips. But how about me? When you thought I couldn't cook, you certainly handed me cakes of ice. I might make my mark in the world as a renowned chop chop if you'd encourage me. Not you. You've rough-housed me and tried to step on my neck." George paused for sheer want of breath.

"I'd like to ask you just one question." Kent affected a deep, sudden interest in George.

"I oughtn't to listen to you, but I can't help hearing you. You roar like a lion, and I'm not deaf. Question."

"Is there any more corn cake?" Kent came out boldly.

"Wouldn't you like to know, though?" George beamed effulgently upon Kent.

"Sure there is. Look at Mejicano's face," David said shrewdly. Tony could not keep his dark, regular features sober.

"There's nothing mean about me." George bounced to his feet and ran off a few yards into the woods. He returned in a minute, importantly lugging a second big corn cake. The series of whoops which greeted him and his corn bread brought his wide smile into roguish evidence.

"I'll never tell you where I learned to make this stuff," he said as he passed the cake to Tony for safe handling and sat down again in his usual place. "I can make just as good biscuits as old Hal, too," he boasted. "I know how to make chocolate cake, coconut and banana cake, and cornstarch pudding. It's all up to the way you behave whether you ever get any of my fancy cooking or not."

After breakfast the sun came out in warm golden glory, though toward noon scudding grayish-white clouds sailed across the sky, obscuring the blue. This gave support to the guide's prediction at sun-up of coming storm.

Fond hopes of bagging a turkey gobbler sent Tony, Kent, Hal, and Shy Beaver on a bird hunt. Norton, David, and George remained at the camp.

"If that bluff affair hadn't come off this morning I'd say we could all leave camp together for a few hours. This part of the map has seemed deserted enough of humans until today. Now we must keep an eye on our stuff. Hard to say who may be in the offing." Norton did not relish this annoying new precaution against freedom on the trail.

He and the boys worked like beavers all morning making an arched shelter high enough for the ponies to stand under in a rain storm. They selected long, slender, thickly leaved tree limbs, crossing them and interlacing them overhead, then lashing them to two parallel rows of stout side poles.

Hunger drove them finally to a hasty snack of corned-beef sandwiches and coffee. They then tackled their task with renewed energy. Norton had been keeping a lynx-eyed watch on the heavens and declared the big storm was a certainty and would "hit" them sometime during the afternoon.

It was well toward three o'clock and the guide had become slightly ill at ease over the

hunters' non-appearance, when they came tearing through the bit of pine woods, riding their ponies at a reckless gallop. Hal led the rush, buoyantly shouting: "Good old Star! Boy Starlight! We beat the storm. Didn't we, boy?"

"You haven't much more than beaten that blow," Norton said half reprovingly.

"But now that we *have* beaten it, take a look at what S. B. has dragged in. Stop and think. Would you rather have had us home half an hour ago, or have roast turkey gobbler for supper?" Hal added one of his irresistible grins to the argument.

"You're too smooth. Since you're here, I'll say the gobbler." Norton stepped over to Shy Beaver, who was trying to hide the elation he felt behind impassive features. He was the only one of the huntsmen who had bagged a turkey and the gobbler slung across one shoulder weighed at least twenty pounds.

"You pinged a prize, Mr. S. Beaver." George admiringly circled the Indian and his trophy. "Remember, G. Fu will roast it for you."

"You certainly put it over the rest of these—would you call them hunters?" David inquired innocently.

"You would if you knew when you were well off," Kent replied meaningly. A threatening united grumble from Tony and Hal backed up Kent.

"Ugh. Go long way. See nothin'. Then see mebbe five, six turkeys. See plenty squirrels. Don't want. Hal want gobbler. Follow turkeys then. No try shoot nothin' else. Hal shoot. No hit gobbler. Me shoot quick. 'Fraid gobbler get away. Other turkeys go quick. No big like gobbler."

"Good work." Only the top crest of pride on which the pleased old chief now rested would have prompted him to describe his own part in the hunt. Norton knew this and was amused accordingly.

Antonio, always a lucky hunter and an unerring shot, had a brace of partridges to show. Hal and Kent had about half a dozen birds between them.

"There's plenty of game in this territory, but it takes a while to get it going for a shot at it," Hal complained. "We ran against a water hole about five miles from here and Kent picked up some bear tracks leading away from it."

"Only I didn't go after 'em this time," Kent said laughingly. He referred to his

headlong pursuit of a black bear during his first summer as a Nevada woodsman, which had ended in his being hopelessly lost.

Norton had felt the definite rise of the wind, beginning soon after two o'clock. Gradually the velocity had increased until now it kept the tree branches swaying continually as it moaned and whistled among them. The sky had grown darker and darker, though no lightning flashes had pierced its smoke-gray murkiness, nor had it begun to thunder.

With the near approach of the gale, Tony and Hal had busied themselves with getting the ponies to the lean-to previously prepared for the animals. Both young woodsmen were enthusiastic over it. Nothing was too good in their estimation for the thoroughbred ponies belonging to the outfit, each the devoted friend of his master.

"Hi, Hal." Norton came running up to Hal and Tony as they were finishing the tethering of the ponies in their new quarters. "Did I give you back your glasses this morning?"

"Blamed if I remember." Hal knit his brows. "Probably you gave 'em to me, all right enough. I was helping razz George Fu, so I don't remember much about 'em. I'll go and look in my knapsack."

"I don't believe I gave them back to you." The guide showed signal annoyance at his own carelessness. "They're not among my stuff. If I've left them down there on the edge of the bluff I deserve a whaling." Norton turned and set off for the bluff's edge at a long, running stride.

Hal started for the lean-to, there to overhaul his own belongings, while Tony, having nothing else to do, followed Norton. He found the guide with the pair of glasses in his hand, his expression anything but satisfied.

"I left 'em right there." He indicated a tree stump about two feet tall with a fairly even top. "Glad I happened to remember them before the storm came. A careless trick. I——"

"Haven't got em, Norton," broke in Hal's cheerful voice as he came running down to the bluff's edge.

"I have them. My own fault, too. You may give me a call-down for it." Norton laughed ruefully.

"Oh, shucks. Other great men have made mistakes. Take myself as an example. I've——"

"Hark!" Norton raised a hand. This time his hearing was in keen evidence. Over

the light banter of Hal's tones he had heard another voice calling in the wind.

"Ah, I hear it, *amigo*," Tony declared after an instant of alert listening. "But from where and how far away does it come? And is it really the human voice? I have heard a panther cry out like a man in great trouble. So it is these beasts howl before the storm."

"Maybe it's George trying to sing." Hal chuckled at the idea.

"Naw." Norton borrowed a Shy Beaverism.

"I haven't heard a thing yet," Hal confessed.

"Stand still and listen, and you will," the guide said with dry amusement. "It's none of our gang who is doing the yelling. There it goes again." He listened intently, endeavoring to locate the direction from whence the cry had come.

Above the moan of the rising wind they could now just barely catch a repetition of what sounded like "Ha-a-a-a-! Ha-a-a-a-!" There was a frantic note in the call that could mean but one thing. Somewhere near them a man was in distress and calling out desperately to them for help.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN IN THE CEDAR TREE

“**P**UT her there.” Hal clapped a hand to his right ear. “I got it that time. It’s a call for help. But where is—” Hal paused, his startled eyes meeting Norton’s. “Great grief! It’s from down there!” He pointed excitedly down the mountain side.

“Right-o.” Norton turned and ran a few yards along the bluff’s edge, Hal following. It seemed to him that the cry had come from a point where the formation of the territory receded, leaving a chasm formed by the merging of the bluff line into that of the mountain proper. It was a declivity stripped of beauty or grandeur in the natural term. It abounded in ancient piles of yellow rock which looked ready to crumble into dust. There was little green down its steep descent except a sparse dotting of misshapen dwarf cedars.

In a flash Hal had thrown himself flat on his face, his head thrust far forward over the perilous edge. His sharp eyes darted from point to point of the ragged declivity. Then

he raised his voice to a stentorian roar in an encouraging: "All-l-l right-t-t! Where—are —you?"

He sent out his call twice in succession before pausing to listen for an answer. He could only hope that the hail had not been lost in the whistle of the wind. Then an answer came, considerably fainter than either Hal's or Norton's halloos had been, but a trifle stronger than it had sounded at first. When the cry came the third time in answer to their shouts it carried with it a distinct ring of hope; as though the imperiled man had gained new encouragement from their welcome cries and was trying to reply gratefully to them.

Norton was now flat on his stomach, too, hanging over the edge of the bluff at a few feet beyond the point where Hal lay. Years of wilderness tramping and training had discovered to him what Hal had thus far missed.

"By all that's queer! Hanged if the man whose doing the yelling isn't stuck in the top of one of those curlicue cedars down there. Now I begin to see what it's all about. It's hard to believe the fellow you saw thrown over the edge this morning was saved. Guess

it's he, though." Norton's quick surmise was voiced as though he could hardly believe what he himself had that morning declared might come about.

"I see him." Hal's glance had darted from one gnarled cedar to another until he had picked up the stranger in distress. "He's in that cedar that looks as if it was trying to do a hump-backed flipflop."

"Yes. That's where he is. Hello, down there!" the guide bellowed at top voice. "Hello-o-o, hello-o-o!"

"Hel-lo-o. Hel-l—o!" This time the answer from below came even more distinctly than before.

"Hang on a little longer. We'll pass you a rope, pronto." Norton repeated the call the third time before the response came: "Thank God! Hurry!"

"He's not more than twenty-five or thirty feet below us. A couple of lariats will do the work." Norton was up from the ground in a twinkling. "Stay here and watch him, Hal. Why, where's Tony? The rascal! I'll bet he's beaten me to it. He must have spotted the fellow in the tree before I picked him up. He simply slid back to camp for ropes."

"You win. Here he comes." Hal mo-

tioned toward Antonio, who was speeding toward them, two lariats over an arm.

"Ay, Señor Norton. I saw him and did not wait to tell you. I knew you could find him for yourself!" Tony exclaimed. "David is coming with two stakes and a mallet. I knew you would want them."

"Always a star, Mejicano." Hal was on his feet now. He aimed an approving whack at Tony's back which Tony adroitly dodged.

"I like better your word than your action, *hermano* (brother)," he told Hal.

"I've been talking to him in spite of the wind," Hal was saying eagerly as the others came dashing to the scene. "He says the roots of the tree he's in are growing right out of the rock and are almost bare. Every time he moves the tree shakes like sixty. We've got to hustle, or he'll go on down and to smash with the first hard blast. The wind is just beginning to tune up. The blast is yet to come. Make no mistake about that."

"We'll get him if I have to go down after him on a second rope to tie him with the first rope," was Norton's encouraging declaration.

The guide's jaws were determinedly set. As he spoke he began hammering the two

stakes Antonio had brought into the tough, unyielding soil. He set them a few inches apart and several feet back from the bluff's edge. Consistent with the caution of the woodsman, he determined that the last hitch in the rope or ropes about to be used should be taken around the stakes rather than to trust entirely to human agency in the matter, regardless of physical strength.

"Let Hal do the talking to him," the guide advised. "More than one fellow shouting at him may rattle him. He has a hard stunt ahead of him."

The two stakes were a part of the outfit's belongings. They were of ash with double grooves in each one for the rope. More than once the Long Trail Boys had found them useful when exploring ravines at a rope's end. The guide had always preached making security doubly sure. Now they were glad to have them on hand in this new emergency.

"Hel-lo, down there." Hal began shouting again. "We're ready to drop the rope now. Can you get the slip noose over your head and around your chest under your shoulders and make fast, or are both your hands busy hanging on?"

"I can make it. Weight the rope enough, and I won't miss it."

It took several minutes of shouting on both sides to exchange the necessary messages. Two or three heavy gusts of wind tore shrieking down the mountain side. A reverberating crash of thunder broke upon the storm-ridden air. A broad, yellow knife of lightning clove the darkness of the sky. It was followed by another heavy roll of thunder.

Meanwhile Norton had weighted the rope and cast it, allowing enough slack in it from the edge of the bluff to the stakes so as not to interfere with the free paying out of it from the edge of the bluff and over.

There came a moment of breathless waiting on the part of the Long Trailers as the weighted rope found its destination. It was growing darker before the rain. The watchers strained their eyes in the gloom. Would the stranger be able to "make it"? They could distinguish him only dimly on his perilous perch in the top of the cedar.

"All right," was the next message the rescue party received from the stranger. "Haul away, and pray the rope's tough."

"It has roped many cayuses, Señor," Tony could not resist shouting. "It will hold you."

It happened to be Tony's lariat that Norton had cast to the stranger.

The young Mexican manned the rope with the guide, standing directly behind Norton. They braced their feet for the pull, then the ticklish feat of rescue began. Slowly and with steady hands they worked. Up from the top of the twisted cedar tree rose the stranger's helpless stalwart form.

"Oh, Christmas!" David exclaimed. "I'm glad I'm not in his shoes." The roped man was hanging in mid air now, but was rising rapidly toward safety through the efficient work of his rescuers.

They drew him upon the surface of the bluff and several feet back from the edge in time with a terrific clap of thunder and a broad, blinding flash of lightning. Then the wind swept down on the bluff with a screech and roar. The big "blow" had come at last.

"Get back, all of you," shouted Norton. "One man over the edge is enough for me. Here comes the rain." A spatter of big raindrops hit him in the face as he turned to speak to the stranger, who had sprung to his feet the instant his rescuers had loosed their hold on the rope.

The tall stranger put out a hand to Norton

without speaking. Then solemnly in turn he offered a hand to the group of young woodsmen. He seemed about to say something then remained silent.

"Let's get to the lean-to." Norton beckoned to the tall stranger to follow him. The latter was now in the act of freeing himself from the rope loop around his body. The guide turned and dashed for cover, the rest of the outfit and its new addition following. A pelting rain was now falling. Aided by the wind, it drove into the woodmen's faces with blinding fury.

"You fellows are lucky, or handy, I'd better say," was the stranger's approving comment as the already well-ducked party gained the shelter of the lean-to.

"Blame it all on Norton," was Hal's instant genial reply. "Only you don't know which of us is Norton. He saw you first, and he and Tony hauled you up. Here he is; the Nevada hermit and the toppo guide of the big, wide West." Hal indicated Norton with a flourish.

"You can't judge a man by a friend's opinions," laughed Norton. "I'm a woodsman for love of the life. I don't consider myself a very good one either."

"Let us tell that," George put in significantly. "We're the Long Trail outfit and we wouldn't be much as woodsmen if Norton hadn't been back of us." He proceeded to name the others in turn to the stranger.

"My name is—" The rescued man had acknowledged George's introductions with a staid repeating of the boys' names which savored of old southern courtesy. He now paused for an instant. "My name is Galland," he said slowly; "Philip Galland."

During the excitement of the rescue of Galland, Shy Beaver had not once vouchsafed a word beyond the succinct offer to Norton: "Man down there can't fix rope, *me* go down on 'nother rope and fix. *You* no go."

In the shadowed light of the lean-to the Navajo had been conducting a shrewd survey of the newcomer. His little black eyes traveled unceasingly from the stranger's tall, lithe form to his well-set head and strong, tanned throat. The Navajo scrutinized the young man's wide-opened brown eyes, regular features, firm, square chin, and thick, wavy brown hair as though trying to bring into play some chord of memory set in vibration at sight of the other's handsome face.

"You Texan," the old chief suddenly remarked, looking squarely at Galland.

"Why, yes, I am," Galland returned pleasantly. "Have you ever seen me before?" he asked rather curiously.

"Mebbe. No sabe. Me think see you El Paso, three years 'go. Then think no see."

"Three years ago I was in northern Idaho. I've only come to the border lately. So it couldn't have been me you saw, Chief."

A gleam of approval at thus being addressed as "Chief" lived for a flash in the Navajo's eyes.

"'Chief'! Somebody's got your number, S. B. You're known for what you are 'way down in Texas," Hal gaily pointed out to the old man.

"Naw!" Shy Beaver's disgusted denial set the crowd of trailers laughing.

Under different circumstances Norton's first question to Galland would have been in regard to his recent predicament. Instead he held back, waiting for an explanation of the matter from the dark stranger. The rest of the outfit took their cue from the guide.

Hal, in particular, longed impatiently for Galland to "open up" and talk. Crowded together in the back of the lean-to, the woodsmen had to carry on a shouted conversation

on account of the roar of the storm. As a result of the situation they gradually became silent for a little.

"The wind's dying down," Hal said presently, during a lull in the gale. "I wonder if it left that tree you were stuck in?" he said to Galland, determined to draw him out.

"I doubt it," returned Galland's deep voice. "The wind seemed to pass it by when the blow started. Then it began to wobble back and forth considerably. I was afraid one stiff sweep of the gale would lift it off the rocks by the roots."

"Oh, mamma! It was bad enough for you to get the cold hand over the—" George began sympathetically. He stopped abruptly, realizing he had said too much.

"How could you know at daylight and not come to help me?" Galland's voice had changed from pleasant to stern. "You can't be friend of Bolden, or you wouldn't have pulled me up. Unless—" He took an agitated step forward as though meditating a rush out into the storm.

"Hold on, Galland." Norton laid a reassuring hand on the young man's shoulder. "We don't know Bolden, whoever he may be. Hal and Shy Beaver saw the fight at day-

light. They got to the bluff just too late to dig in and save you." Briefly the guide recounted their part in the incident. "We put up a good hunt along the edge, too, but couldn't find you," Norton declared.

"Forgive me. It was ungrateful in me to doubt you," Galland said penitently. "I must have struck my head on an outcropping bit of rock just above the tree before it caught me. I didn't remember anything for a while. The wind blowing in my face must have revived me. That's the first thing I recalled after a blank. I knew what was coming and I began to yell for help. I'd seen the horses and heard you fellows talking last night."

"How you managed to go over the edge backward without breaking your back or your neck! That's what I can't see," Hal said wonderingly. "Not to mention missing a thousand-foot drop."

"By the grace of God, I'll say." Galland raised a reverent hand.

"Nothing else but an act of Providence," Norton agreed seriously. "And now, Galland, I'd like to ask you some questions about this Bolden. After he finished you, as he thought, he tried to shoot up Hal and Shy Beaver. Hal courted his fire by chasing him, I'll admit.

Just the same, he's a killer. He's proved it. Shy Beaver says he's a bad Texan. What can you tell us about him?"

"Nothing that is good." Galland's handsome features hardened. "I am his enemy, and he is mine. I have justice and right on my side. He has nothing but greed and murder lust on his. I hate him, but I have no wish to kill him. I am not a murderer at heart. His life is forfeit to the law, and has been for years. He is a Texan. He has been following me for weeks. He hopes to kill me. This territory for almost a square of twenty miles belonged to my father. I am surveying it myself, for Bolden has put in a claim that it belongs to the Bolden estate."

"Oho! I see. This is an affair between two Texan families," Norton said with raised brows.

"Is it a feud?" Kent inquired eagerly. Interested, the Long Trail Boys had moved up in a kind of bunch about Galland. "Oh, I beg your pardon," he said, flushing.

"No; it was never a feud. The Gallands were true men. The Boldens were rustlers and scoundrels. Between such opposites there could be no feud. The Galland men never tried to kill any of the Boldens, but the

Bolden rustlers made war even on the Galland women. Now all the Boldens are dead except Dirke, the killer. And I am the last Galland."

"Dirke, the killer, may go out by the porous route himself if he tries any more target practice on us," Hal vowed vengefully. "We wouldn't draw on even a Mex bandit first. But, oh, boy! Watch us hand it back when a bad man starts pinging us! *And we're all good shots, too.*"

"Bolden is far from here by this time. He was not keen to tackle your outfit." Galland was regarding breezy Hal with a smile of genuine liking. "He believes he has finished me. He will probably hurry to his ranch on his own business. It is the old Bolden ranch. Somewhere near it is a secret rustlers' den. Just where it is no one knows. I have often thought I might be able to find it if I could spare the time to make the search. Both sheepmen and cattlemen lose heavily of stock each year. Fine horses have been spirited away overnight. Nearly always a shepherd or a vaquero has been killed while on duty."

"How far from here is the Bolden Ranch?" David asked interestedly. He was thinking of Craig and hoping his benefactor's land did not adjoin Bolden's.

"About twenty-five miles to the south of us. According to Bolden's reckoning, his territory begins about a mile south of here. All the land between here and the Bolden Ranch for a distance of about twenty miles across is his. South of the Bolden Ranch and adjoining is another big tract of land which Bolden is also trying to get away with. I have heard that it belongs to a rich Westerner, but he has never come to claim it that I know of, so Bolden has absorbed that, too. But he shall not absorb *my* land!" Galland's final words were freighted with iron determination.

"Great jumping Jupiter!" Hal's cry registered pure amazement. "What do you know about it? Put two and two together. What's the result? Tigerface has cribbed Misser Craig's property. Oh, gee! Wait till Craig hears about it!"

CHAPTER V

SOME INTERESTING INFORMATION

“**C**RAIG. That’s the western fellow’s name. I had forgotten it.” Galland looked, if anything, more surprised than Hal. “I take it from what you say that you know him well.”

“Do we?” Hal’s amused question was lost in the wave of laughter and hearty salutation the boys sent up in honor of Hartwell Craig, their comrade of the trail. “I should say we do know good old Craig. Why, he’s down here now, has been for several weeks. We’re to meet him at Francisco Pass.”

“How far from the Pass are we?” Norton broke in tersely. “You know where it is, of course.”

“Yes, it is about twenty-five miles from here, but to the southeast. Francisco Pass happens to be a part of my property. I was named Francisco in honor of a Spanish general my great-grandfather knew and liked. Francisco del Moltez was his name. To think a hound like Dirke Bolden should dare lay claim to a Galland’s property!” A fierce

rush of anger flamed into Galland's handsome features. Involuntarily his strong brown hands clenched themselves. He laughed, shortly and bitterly.

"I hope Craig hasn't had any run-ins with Tigerface," Hal commented. "He's a game fighter, and White Shadow, a Yaqui chief who's with him, is as good as a dozen men when it comes to a scrap. Gam, our Chinese cook, is no coward, either. He's with Craig, too."

"I have heard of White Shadow," Galland returned, his answer tinged with surprise. "Even the border wolves have some fear of him. Many Mexicans believe this White Shadow is Montezuma, the Aztec emperor, who has come back to earth to live the free life of the woods as a Yaqui chief."

"Whee! That's great medicine. Wait till we tell Emperor. You see," Hal explained boyishly, "we call him Emperor. We think he's as great as Montezuma."

"Glad to hear he is with your friend Craig. He'll understand these wolves and this territory better than Craig with all his trailing experience. These border rustlers are black-hearted fiends, without souls or consciences. All they think of or know is to plunder and

kill; kill and plunder. It doesn't matter which comes first to them. There aren't any worse fellows in the world than border rustlers. And most of 'em are Texans whose ancestors have been thieves and murderers ever since they struck this part of the country," ended Galland.

"Craig picked a nice location for a summer home, didn't he?" Kent commented with a soft chuckle. Sobering, he added, "It's up to us to take the trail to the Pass, pronto."

"The sooner the better." David echoed Kent's earnest suggestion.

"It's clearing." Kent stepped to the edge of the lean-to and peered up at the fast lightening sky.

Gradually the rain had ceased and the wind had died down to spells of milder blowing. Raindrops still pattered down from the trees, but in that rare mountain altitude the wet landscape would dry with magical quickness.

Shy Beaver had also decided to consult the sky and was now out under the trees peering up through the branches like a wise old bird. Glad to end their enforced stay in the lean-to, the rest of the party had now come out into the open air.

"No more storm," the Navajo asserted

very positively. "No dark for five hours. Little Father, better take trail. Come quick to Pleasant Brave. Mebbe tomorrow sun-up." He turned to Norton, a flicker of real concern lighting his small, black eyes. Next to Hal, the old chief liked Hartwell Craig especially.

"I'm with you, Chief." Norton never disregarded the Navajo's rare advice. Shy Beaver's proposal that the outfit break camp and move on in the face of approaching darkness meant something.

"Ugh! Little Father speak wise. Mebbe ride all night. Mebbe no make camp. Eat good now. Then ride quick. Come Pass tomorrow sun-up."

"Now what have you got under your old deerskin cap, S. B.?" Hal demanded to know. "Why do we have to flee, fly, flit? Is Tigerface lurking around this park, with his lovely bunch of horse snatchers?"

"Naw. We go to Pass quick. Pleasant Brave mebbe have trouble. In woods near no good. White Shadow, Pleasant Brave, Gam Fu fight for life, mebbe. White Shadow know place to hide near Pass, if can get there safe!"

Hal indulged in a long, low whistle. "It's

time the Long Trail gang got busy and supported Mr. Craig." Hal began singing in his clear, high tenor but with a ring of decided seriousness under his musical tones:

"Get up and go hiking
It's time to go piking,
Old Craig needs the gang, you know:
The outfit is aching
Some heads to be breaking.
At sun-down we're going to go":

Hal's breezy pledge of fellowship brought a lusty repetition of the refrain from his pals.

"You'll go with us, Galland?" Norton invited. "We have an extra pony with us. It belongs to Gam, our Chinese cook and pal. You're welcome to ride the cayuse."

"Thank you, but I—" Galland hesitated, staring frowningly ahead. He seemed at a loss for a response to the guide's hearty invitation.

"Oh, come on, Mr. Galland," Hal urged cheerfully. He had taken one of his impulsive "likings" to the dark-eyed, courteous Texan. "Better join us. We're a good lively bunch. Yes, gang?" He laughingly turned to his pals for confirmation.

"Sure! Betcha! Toppo!" came back in loud, confirming slang.

"I know you are. I'd like to stick to your gang." Galland's somber face underwent a swift change, brightening into little smiling lines. "I owe my life to you. I'll not forget that. But I've a fight of my own to make and I'm not going to drag you into it. That's what it would mean if I stuck to you even as far as the Pass. Bolden is my bitterest enemy. I hate him as I do a rattlesnake." The brightness faded from the Texan's face.

"You should worry. He has it in for us already," Hal assured blithely. "He's after Craig's land and my hide. He's not the first bad man who couldn't stand this aggregation. We don't expect him to enthuse over us. Besides, if Craig is missing at the Pass when we get there. Bing! Something is going to drop on Tigerface. Just like that!" Hal made a swift, menacing gesture.

"Hal has said it. Since none of us seem to be popular with this Bolden, I'd say we'd best stick together as far as the Pass, anyway," Norton argued. "We had trouble with this scamp before we met you. We'd undoubtedly have had trouble with him wherever we might have run into him."

"True," Galland agreed soberly. "There are other reasons why I ought to go on alone. I can't explain them to you now. I'll hope to some day. Your offer of a horse to the Pass is a great temptation. I'm in a hurry to get there. My own horse was stolen three nights ago. I can show you a short cut to the Pass by riding with you. That much I can do for you. And you'll not be likely to run into Bolden's cutthroats on the way, either. Your horses would set them firing at you, pronto."

"You have seen the ponies, señor?" Antonio asked the Texan in polite surprise.

"Yes. I was taking a look at them this morning when Bolden slipped up behind me. He was after me and the cayuses, too. I was so keen about the ponies that I relaxed my guard. You know what happened to me."

"Well, we're burning daylight. Better bring up the horses and load 'em," Norton advised. He and Tony and George walked over to the ponies' shelter. The others lingered briefly to gather up such of their personal effects as still strewed the ground out of the rain's radius.

"Say," Hal remarked in a low tone, "I wish Galland would open up about that scrap. He's hardly spilled a bean about it."

"He's a shut-mouth proposition; like S. B." George cast an impish glance at the Navajo.

"Ugh; good!" The old chief retorted imperturbably. "When see him, White Shadow like."

"*You don't say.* He's passed a hundred in deportment already, hasn't he?" Hal raised his eyebrows at Shy Beaver. "Well, I'm going to quiz him a little when I have a good chance. I can't see how as good a trailer as this fellow seems to be should have let himself be chased out on that bluff. He must have known he couldn't whip a man like Bolden. Tigerface is some giant."

"There is something queer about Galland," George announced reflectively. "He sounds awfully good. Shy Beaver's sure he is. And yet—How do we know that he isn't playing some slick robber's game of his own?"

"Naw-w." Shy Beaver cast a withering glance at George, who received it with a broad smile.

"Oh, cheesecake," scoffed Hal. "Galland is straight enough, I think. But he has a queer way about him. He acts as if he was afraid we'd find out something he didn't want us to know. That's about as near to what I mean as I can express myself."

"Oh, never mind Galland. My stuff's ready and so am I to hit the trail again," was Kent's energetic declaration. "Let's get the ponies loaded, pronto, and be on our way."

"You're getting ahead of yourself. We can't load the ponies till after supper," George reminded.

"Then go to it, Chinee George, Horrible Hash Hustler, and trot out some chuck," ordered David. "Try to be good for something."

"I will. Don't mind if the sugar gives out before it gets to you," George flung back pointedly.

Anxious to start, the four trailers turned their combined attention toward getting a pick-up supper. Hal made the coffee, Kent warmed up canned beans with tomato sauce, David opened canned pears and boxes of chocolate crackers, while George fried bacon and bossed the job with a great show of bluster.

Meanwhile Antonio, Norton, and Shy Beaver were still engaged in showing Galland the ponies.

"The finest bunch of horseflesh I ever saw together." His peculiar change from interest to sudden reserve which "had Hal going"

did not show itself as he stood and admired the ponies. He was all interest and enthusiasm.

"This one is mine." Antonio led Hidalgo forward. He put the beautiful animal through several of the clever tricks he had taken pains to teach his pet.

"He's a wonder," was Galland's enthusiastic opinion as he patted Hidalgo's satiny neck.

"He is the younger brother of Serapis, señor," Tony said with pride. "Serapis is, *verdad*, the wonder horse of northern Mexico. I believe there can be no other horse in the world like him. Have you heard of him?"

"Serapis?" Galland repeated the name with marked surprise. "Yes, I have heard of Serapis. It is said his owner is a notorious bandit who poses as a rich Mexican."

"No more, señor. It is Señor Craig who owns Serapis now." Antonio narrated briefly the story of the purchase of Serapis by Craig from Crespero, the reputedly wealthy Mexican who turned out to be el Halcon, the Mexican bandit, and the part the Long Trail Boys had played in helping White Shadow bring him to justice.

"A queer thing," Galland said musingly. His comment vibrated with incredulous irony.

"*Porque* (why), señor?" Tony came back a trifle crisply. He wondered if Galland had not believed his story.

Norton also shot a peculiar sidelong glance at the Texan from his slate-gray eyes. He said nothing, pending Galland's reply.

"Bolden wants not only your friend Hartwell Craig's land. He wants Serapis. I have been told by one who knows that for two years he has been trying to get on the trail of Serapis to steal the horse."

"Can you beat that?" The guide vented a short, displeased laugh. "Craig seems to have walked into the middle of trouble. He was to bring Serapis here himself. If he has—all the more reason why we must hurry to him. You see I don't underrate the danger he's in from these robbers. They seem to be the old-time border gunmen."

"White Shadow knows a secret place where they can hide and not be found by anyone," Tony said hopefully.

"I only hope they've cinched it then," Galland replied with warmth. "Your outfit is well armed, I take it?" he said interrogatively.

"Yes; we have rifles and revolvers enough to go round and some to spare, and we know how to use them. We never start anything,

and we hold our fire until we know we must defend ourselves. Then something usually drops. I have preached it to my gang, though, not to aim to kill unless it is to save life. We are not out man-hunting, though some of it has come our way in the past four summers. It's the free life of the woodsman we want, with plenty of sport. When we hunt, it's for food, and we shoot to kill first time, if we can. We don't enjoy seeing the wild creatures suffer. That's about our standard." There was a ring of justifiable pride in Norton's little speech.

"Comee getee, comee getee," bawled at the top of the four cook's lungs, urged the three men from the horses to the familiar oilcloth square which the supper already graced, smoking hot.

"No more yell. Too much noise," was Shy Beaver's cautionary mandate as he sat down stolidly at the oilcloth, looking none too pleased. "Keep still. Eat quiet. Ride quiet. Mebbe then no see anyone."

"You're right, old man. You've a great little head," George patted his own head significantly. "It's something like mine."

"Good work, S. B. These fellows need the brake put on," Norton said.

"Oh, shucks. Tell that to Brent. He makes more racket than all the rest of us put together," David grumbled.

"Old Mejicano is a noisy proposition," George accused. He had the grace not to look at Antonio.

"*Ay di mi!*" Tony leveled reproachful eyes at George. "You are the *ingrato* (ungrateful one). This is my reward for helping you cook the breakfast."

"Duck him in the next body of water we strike," Kent tranquilly advised.

"No duck nothin'," Shy Beaver's protest was a trifle testy. His Indian nature bade him be up and stirring in a serious spirit. "Hurry up. Start soon. No more josh."

"Yours truly, Misser Sassy Beaver." Hal gaily saluted the nettled Navajo, who acknowledged the salute with an unwilling grin.

Thus admonished by the old chief, the outfit dived into their supper with their usual hungry zest, minus their usual exuberant noise. The meal was hardly over before the trail hitters had the cooking utensils cleansed and divided among them and the ponies were brought forward and loaded, each with a comparatively light amount of luggage.

Antonio brought the pony Comet to Gal-

land, who accepted the rein with a grateful, "You've surely treated me fine. I'll not forget." He and Tony were last to mount, the others having already swung into saddle ready to move upon hearing Norton's starting signal.

It came; a low whistle on Norton's fingers. This time it was decidedly subdued. With Galland in the lead, the riders turned their ponies in the direction of the trail by which they had reached the bluff. They would use a continuation of this trail for a number of miles, then would strike the secret trail of which Galland had told them.

Last of the trailers came Hal and Antonio.

"See; I am last as usual," smiled Antonio, "even if I have no burros to mind."

"It's bully to be able to travel a few miles without the confounded old burries," Hal replied. "Star doesn't mind carrying other junk besides Hal. Do you, Star?" Hal leaned forward to stroke Starlight's neck. "Craig may have his troubles getting burries down here, since——"

"Uh-h!" Hal's left hand let go the rein and flew to his left cheek. Next instant it came away red with blood.

Whir-r-r. He heard the faint hum and

felt the vibration of air as four or five bullets whizzed between him and Antonio and uncomfortably close to their heads. He heard Antonio give a sharp, angry "*Maldito!*" No sounds of firing meant the bullets had been fired from revolvers equipped with silencers.

"Watch your step! We're fired upon!" Hal sent the stentorian alarm echoing through the afternoon stillness of the pine woods. "Tigerface is on the job again!"

CHAPTER VI

THE SECRET TRAIL

THE riders were still in the pine woods with only a few yards between them and the trail. Quick as lightning Hal had drawn his own automatic revolver from the holster. He raised and aimed it deliberately in the direction whence the attack had come. He began firing with the expectation that the hidden sniper or snipers would send a second hail of bullets. Tony had also opened fire upon the lurking enemy.

“Follow us!” Norton’s decided tones of command came floating back to Tony and Hal.

Trained to obey the guide’s orders implicitly, the two urged their ponies ahead toward the others who were just coming up to the trail. Single file, with Galland leading, the riders thundered down the rugged trail to a point where a sudden bend in it hid the perilous pine woods from their view. A huge outcropping of piled-up rock formed the bend. It furnished a temporary shelter for

the Long Trailers and was the point for which Galland had headed at sound of Hal's alarm.

"Did you get pinged?" were Hal's first words, addressed to Antonio as the riders drew together behind the sheltering rocks.

"It was nothing. Only the tip of one ear. It hardly bleeds," Antonio returned carelessly. "But a bullet took a little hair and skin from Hidalgo's neck. It was then I cursed the sniper."

"Here, Hal. Let me see that decoration you're sporting." Kent had already got out a first-aid package from his saddlebag. George had filled his collapsible drinking cup from his water bottle and was holding it ready for Kent to use in the washing of Hal's wound.

"Oh, beans! It's only a deep scratch," Hal protested as the boys cleansed the long, shallow furrow in the upper part of his cheek, sterilized it with iodine and fastened a bit of gauze over it with adhesive plaster.

"It looks as if this Bolden was after our scalps," Norton said crisply. "He must have it in for Hal especially, since he began on him. Do you think he's been hanging around near our camp alone since he sent you over the edge, or are some of his men with him?"

"He's not alone. He's after the horses.

He knows by this time that he didn't succeed in finishing me. He wasn't trailing you at first. He was after me, and happened to come upon your camp. Now he's on our trail like the wild beast he is. It won't do him any good. He can't come up on us now except by this trail. It's a long drop on one side and a choked-up wilderness on the other. We'll have to keep a lookout at the back trail as we go. But we'll lose him for good at dark, even if he should trail us," was the Texan's summing up of the situation.

"It must be some secret trail if Tigerface hasn't found it after all the years he's been down here," was David's half incredulous opinion.

"It is," the Texan affirmed emphatically. "It was blazed by a man—" He made one of his aggravating pauses. "Only myself and one other person know it," he finished shortly. "Shall we start again, Mr. Norton?" He turned to the guide. "I'd like to be at a certain point on our way by dusk."

"I'm with you in your judgment," Norton concurred. "You'd better be lookout, Tony."

"Si, señor Boss. That means I shall ride Hidalgo backward," he accepted, showing white teeth in a mischievous smile.

"That's only to let us know you're a trick rider," jeered George.

"Oh, you have known it a long time," the Mexican retorted tranquilly. He spoke a few Spanish words to Hidalgo, then vaulted backward into saddle. This meant that Hidalgo must be guided by his master's voice, which fact the thoroughbred understood. When the single-file procession started again the clever pony fell in behind Starlight, trotting along, obedient to Antonio's new commands.

As the riders proceeded on their way they found themselves gradually ascending the mountain as the trail wound around it. After the first five miles, however, it began to drop, sharply, steeply, into a shallow, grassy canyon. They traversed the canyon bottom, stopping at a little stream to water their ponies and refill their water bottles.

As a lookout, nothing escaped the Mexican boy's keen eyes. When at length they came to the canyon and stopped briefly for water, Tony had nothing to report. He was of the opinion that they were not being followed.

"Does the secret trail begin in one of the sides of this canyon?" Kent asked eagerly, after casting about him for a possible opening in the rocks. He imagined it might be a

passage similar to the one back of the waterfall which led into Emerald Valley, White Shadow's Nevada home.

"No. You'll see it soon, though," Galland assured the impatient young men.

Presently they were leaving the little canyon to come upon the trail again as it continued downward in a roundabout fashion to where below the steeps lay a broad valley, its gently sloping sides green with thousands of acres of grazing ground.

"Here's where we drop the trail we're on and travel the secret one," Galland announced with grim humor. His shadowed features lightened to a smile as he noted the puzzled, baffled expressions his declaration evoked.

"Blest if I can see any signs of our little private speedway," Hal finally admitted, looking crestfallen.

"You pick it up, S. B. You can find it," Kent told the Navajo confidently.

"Mebbe." Shy Beaver was not so sure. He slid from his horse and began walking along the lower side of the trail, his gaze intently fastened upon the apparently impassable thickets of twisted-trunked saplings, tangled bushes and interwoven tough-tendriled vines. From the trail far down to

the valley below this impenetrable wilderness stretched unbroken save by narrow-topped ravines choked with rank green growth.

"Mebbe here." At length he paused before a riot of tall thorny bushes. His small black eyes roved sharply over the mass of luxuriant green. "No see how; but mebbe there."

"It's there, all right, and you've hit the spot," Galland said heartily. "You'll have a glimpse of it before dark. Then we must be into it and on our way. Twilight's almost done."

Leaping from Comet's back, he went over to the spot where the Navajo still stood. Very carefully he parted the tall green bushes at a certain point in the thicket. Parted in the center, they fell back out of the way without catching his clothing.

The Long Trail Boys saw him reach forward with his right arm to a second mass of green directly behind the tall bushes. To their amazement it began to move outward like a green brier gate. Next instant a concerted breath of surprise ascended. It was really a gate, constructed so cleverly of green bushes and vines that it defied detection. Behind where the gate closed they glimpsed the beginning of a fairly smooth trail at least two and a half feet wide.

"How did it get that way?" George wanted to know. "Is that your invention, Mr. Galland?"

"No. I'm not clever enough to have made such a perfect camouflage. It was made by a friend of mine. It took him months to make it and he keeps it trimmed and in condition the year round. You might think it would be noticeable in winter. It isn't. The gate itself has a framework of brownish-green wire that looks like the natural bush both summer and winter. The gate swings from a small wire trellis at the right-hand side on odd little wire hinges which the inventor of the camouflage made. More than once this secret trail has been a hiding place for us when our lives were in danger."

The Long Trail Boys were eager to examine the clever camouflage, but Galland seemed ill at ease and soon suggested: "We'd best pass through now. Will you ride first, Mr. Norton? The trail is easy. I have traveled it in the blackest darkness many times," he assured the guide. "I must go last so as to shut the gate. The trail ends three miles from here in a pine thicket which is also a camouflage."

Single file, with Norton leading, the

trailers rode through the camouflaged gateway. They had not ridden a dozen yards before the same thought had occurred to each. Their hidden path was singularly free from impeding tree limbs and branches. Opening his arms on both sides, Hal's hands came into contact with tall, smooth-leaved bushes rather than ragged tendrils, thorny shoots, or clinging vines. By the last bit of twilight that filtered through the almost arching bush tops over the hidden trail Hal made a discovery. He was sure that the smooth-leaved bushes were the same as those of a shrub which he had seen growing profusely in Mexico. He could only wonder how such shrubs had come there.

It was not yet nine o'clock when Norton suddenly found himself on the edge of what appeared to be an impenetrable pine thicket. Close examination of the thicket, however, brought to evidence another cleverly concealed gate set among a mass of small pines and other saplings.

He immediately passed word to George, who came behind him, to ride through quickly and without noise. George as promptly passed the word on, with the result that each rider guided his horse noiselessly through the

camouflaged thicket and continued on to a small level belt of pines not far from the thicket.

"Everybody here?" Norton ran a searching eye over the group of riders.

"Everybody but Galland. He's still on the other side of the thicket," Kent returned in guarded tones.

"Maybe he's given us the shake," was George's flippant surmise. "If he has, I see where Gam will need a new horsie. Either that or go to riding the burries again."

"No steal Gam's cayuse," Shy Beaver interposed, frowning. "Come here soon."

"Galland certainly has a strong pull with the Navajos," Kent said, laughing.

"I'll take him at your word, Shy Beaver," Norton said with sudden decision. He had yet to find the old chief in error in his estimates of persons.

Time wore on without bringing Galland. For nearly three hours the riders waited, on and off their ponies, impatiently wondering why the delaying Texan did not appear.

"It begins to look as though he might have given us the slip," David said, half suspiciously.

"*Silencio.*" Tony's left hand went up in a gesture of attention. "Someone is coming," he said softly after a moment of keen listening.

Within the pine thicket came a faint stirring sound, as of something or someone moving about. Every pair of eyes leaped to the dark blur of the thicket. Came the subdued clip-clop of iron-shod feet striking upon the dry ground. The watchers could see the violent movement of the stunted pines, then out of the thicket a horse's head appeared. Next instant to the relief of the waiting woodsmen Galland emerged from the thicket upon Comet.

CHAPTER VII

BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON

“I’M sorry,” he made apology in a voice just above a whisper as he came up with the compact group on horseback under the pines. “I couldn’t get here sooner.” He offered no further explanation of his delay.

“We’ll travel an old cattle trail that begins just below this point. It will bring us straight to Francisco Pass,” he continued in low, rapid tones. “The longest part of our ride is yet to come. We’ll reach the Pass before sun-up. Then you can turn in for a couple of hours’ sleep. As soon as it is light we’ll begin a hunt for Mr. Craig.”

“If Craig and White Shadow are anywhere near we’ll get no sleep.” Hal was full of pleasant anticipation. “Emperor could find us in the darkest dump in darkest Africa if he set out to do it.”

With the Texan still in the lead, the riders were soon on the old cattle trail, which was wide enough for them to ride two by two.

It was the full of the moon and the trail lay distinct and well-defined in the white moonlight. While the day had been visited

by storm, the night was perfect in its white, mysterious beauty. Hour after hour the riders followed the old cattle path, edging as it did the left-hand side of the valley. It was nearing three o'clock when their guide led them into one of the several small canyons that indented the valley's steep sloping green sides. They had reached Francisco Pass at last.

The walls of the little canyon were high and rugged, yet the radiance of the moon's rays showed the riders a grass-grown trail following the course of a shallow thread of a wash. For perhaps a mile the party continued to follow the wet trail in silence. Galland had borne upon them the necessity of keeping quiet until they reached a certain point of the Pass, where he advised the party make a stop until sunrise.

"Wait here a minute," he said to his companions. Dismounting, he ran over to the opposite side of the canyon. The watchers saw the play of a strong pocket flash light upon gray rocks. At the same time they caught a glimpse of what seemed to be a narrow opening in them.

The Texan slipped through the shadowy opening, disappearing into what they guessed

to be another canyon. Five minutes elapsed, then ten, before he reappeared with a low-spoken: "All right. This side canyon will be the thing for us till morning. I'll stand guard at the rocks there while you fellows get a couple hours of sleep. No one can get to you except by that break in the rocks." He nodded toward the opening in the rock pile.

"I'll stand guard," Norton spoke just ahead of the offers the rest of the outfit eagerly made. The Long Trail Boys liked the job of doing guard duty. "You've been more than kind to us already. We're woodsmen in the knockabout sense of the word, you see. We're used to most any old thing that may happen when we're on these jaunts."

While the Nevada Hermit was appreciative of Galland's offer to steer his flock away from gun fights with rustlers, he was not accustomed to being led about through the woods himself. He was too thoroughly experienced a woodsman not to be able to find his way in the forest, even on the darkest night.

"Two guards are better than one," Galland again volunteered for guard duty. His tone was light, but Norton detected stubborn persistence underneath it.

"You're welcome to join me," Norton returned simply. To the boys he said: "Two guards are enough. Better get some sleep while you can."

The opening in the rocks was just large enough to let the ponies through, led by their riders. The trailers had not gone more than a hundred yards down this secondary canyon before coming to a winding turn. Following it, they found themselves in a kind of open square overhung by arching masses of yellow, time-worn stone. Up above the stars twinkled down at them. The whiteness of the moonlight revealed every corner and cranny of the little open square.

"Blamed if it doesn't look like our patio at Sweet Water!" exclaimed Hal as the trailers halted to take stock of their new surroundings.

"Jiminy Christmas, but I'm hungry," complained Kent. "I've a mind to make Georgie Fu cook up some eats."

"Uh-h! Have you?" grinned George. "I'd like to see you *make me* do anything."

"*I'll show you.*" Kent made an open-armed rush at George. George dodged directly behind David, who got the full effect of the grip of Kent's muscular arms. Once David had extricated himself from Kent's

forceful onslaught, the pair joined forces and launched themselves upon George.

"I'm hungrier than ever now," Kent finally declared, "but G. Fu has struck. We've walloped him, and he's still sassy. I'll finish the job tomorrow." Kent fixed a threatening eye upon George, who met it with a derisive, "Mebbe."

"No mebbe about it." Kent turned his back disdainfully upon George. He began rummaging in his saddlebag for a box of coconut cookies. Finding it, he broke it open and offered the contents to Galland, then Norton. Galland refused the cakes with a tolerant smile. Norton took one.

"The rest of you fellows may furnish your own cakes. Mebbe I'll swap cakes with you if I see any I think I'd like," was Kent's gracious proviso. He took his blanket roll from Silverheels' back, flattened it and sat down on it, then enjoyingly helped himself to cakes.

The others were equally busy getting out their blankets and hungrily munching cakes from one of the two or three small packages each was in the habit of carrying in his saddlebags. Galland stood watching the group of lively young woodsmen, a half wistful

light in his grave, dark eyes. They were a well-set up crowd of young men, was his thought. Not only that. They seemed to have the true instincts of the trail maker. It was easy to believe Norton's words, "We're used to most any old thing that may happen."

"I'm going to take a look up there." The Texan at length rose from a big stone on which he had been sitting. He nodded toward the continuation of the canyon, dark and mysteriously veiled in shadow.

Hal, watching him, was impressed afresh at the lithe, animal-like grace of the Texan's movements as he stretched his arms above his head. Galland had all the supple grace of a black panther he had once seen at a Zoo.

"There'll be no use in starting a hunt through the canyon for your friend Craig until sun-up." Galland turned to the guide. "I'm only going to do a little scouting now to see what's doing, if anything. I think the canyon is clear of Bolden's gang. I'll soon know if it isn't."

"At your service if you want us along," Hal put in heartily.

"Yes, of course." Norton turned to Galland. "I took it you would rather go alone, so didn't offer to go with you."

"Yes, I would rather go alone," the Texan said, almost as though speaking to himself. The return of his odd, mysterious manner vaguely nettled Norton.

Next minute the guide was smiling to himself at having been annoyed by it. He had met all manner of men in his years of wandering through the West. He was still inclined to accept Galland at his face value.

"All right for you, Galland," Hal said reproachfully. "When we can't go any place else we can go to sleep." He picked out a corner of the natural court, a little away from where his chums were already rolling up for sleep, and promptly turned in.

Instead of starting immediately on his solitary scouting expedition up the canyon, the Texan pulled a small but powerful flash light from a coat pocket and made a careful tour of the rocky roofless room, turning the bright rays into every crevice and corner.

"Looking for rattlers?" asked the guide. "Make up your mind Tony's seen to that already. He never fails in that detail. I taught the boys the importance of it on the trail. But Tony's my best bet."

"A man's never without the miserable pests down here. I hate 'em. I've cleared them

pretty well off my ranch. I've fought them year after year and cleared out two dens of them on my land. I'd like you to stop off at my ranch. As the Mexies have it, 'It is yours.' A poor return for what you did for me," Galland ended with a burst of grateful sincerity.

"Oh, pshaw!" Norton grew embarrassed. "You know the code of the trail. You've gone out of your way to help us. We'll stop off at your ranch as soon as we meet Craig, and thanks for your invitation. But Craig has to come first. If he's not camping in this Pass, something's wrong, dead wrong." Norton's firm mouth tightened. "Hartwell Craig has a habit of being exactly *where* he says he'll be *when* he says he'll be there."

CHAPTER VIII

A HAIL IN THE DARKNESS

THE Texan received Norton's half worried declaration in comparative silence. Norton, never a talker, stood with hands in his trousers pockets, darkly considering what might have happened to Craig in such a lawless territory.

The silence between the two men continued. Galland broke it with: "Your gang is out for sport, not blood. There's nothing but blood and death down here. It'll be that way till somebody gets Bolden. I hope it will be my bullet that finds his black heart." The Texan's face grew savage, revealing a stubborn cruelty, of which there was no trace on the calm surface.

"What gets me is that Craig never mentioned any such stir-up in his letters." Norton looked puzzled rather than impressed by Galland's bitter statement. "He started for this locality in April on horseback. Why, he has White Shadow with him! White Shadow is a Yaqui chief who's a wonder at trailing. It's queer he shouldn't know of this robber's

roost. I don't doubt your word, Galland. I'm only wondering why Craig didn't wise us to the situation in his latest letter to me."

"Bolden and his gang have been away on a big rustling expedition until recently," was Galland's quick information. "I heard they crossed into Mexico to raid plantations. Bolden has probably been trying to get a line on Serapis. Almost a week ago I heard from one who knows that Bolden had returned to his ranch. Three days later I knew it for a certainty. He trailed me through the woods to finish me. You know what happened. Now it may be that Mr. Craig hasn't yet run against him or his gang. White Shadow must surely know of Bolden's rustlers. Why, this section of the map's not much better than it was forty or fifty years ago. It's a regular bad man's land."

"That's just the reason it seems to me we should have come up with Craig, White Shadow, and Gam before this," Norton pointed out. "Old Shy Beaver said something the other day about the gang of cattlemen and sheepmen who had a regular war down here several years ago. He said it was a bad country to trail in then."

"It's that still," reiterated Galland.

"You've seen what Bolden is. His men are like their master. A more wicked bunch never stole cayuses. You'd not care to bring any of these young fellows of yours into camp across the saddlebow. That's what's likely to happen here. Better chuck this death trap as soon as you meet your friends." There was genuine sincerity in the suggestion.

"It all depends upon Craig's point of view," replied the guide. "If he's already made up his mind to stick to his Texas ranch for a while, he'll stick. Naturally we'll stick to him. This is our fifth summer trailing together. Brent is the only one of the boys whose parents are living. His father and mother wouldn't want him to be a danger dodger. Whitney is my nephew. I feel the same about him."

"Mr. Craig has wealth and influence. He could fight Bolden through the courts and win," Galland said slowly. "But—" He came to an abrupt stop. After a moment he continued: "A clear title's no good to a dead man. Bolden's way of winning would be to get Mr. Craig."

"The only way to fight Bolden's kind is to run them into jail and see that they get the rope," was Norton's succinct opinion. "If

Craig starts to fight these rustlers White Shadow will send his bunch of picked Indians to clean up this section. They're special government scouts and know their business. You should have asked the government long ago for special police protection."

"I thought of doing it. I—I couldn't. There are reasons why I've fought Bolden alone. If Mr. Craig should decide to fight him, and he will have to do it, I believe, he will be welcome to my services. I'll take a hike up the Pass now. I'll be back in less than an hour." Galland wheeled and started off into the shadows of the deeper darkness of the canyon.

Norton selected a smooth spot on the rocky floor of the natural patio, swept his flash light over it and dropped wearily down upon it. Tired though he was, his keen eyes moved alertly from point to point in the moon-bathed court. Near him on the left his comrades lay sound asleep in a blanketed, mummy-like row, with the exception of Hal, who was stretched out at the lower end of the patio near the ponies.

Lacking sizable trees to which to tether the ponies, Tony had cleverly fastened one rein to another, forming a continuous chain. One

end of the chain he had fastened firmly to the one tree growing in the patio, an undersized alder. While the ponies could be trusted over the hardest bit of trail, they could not be trusted untethered at night. The inherent love of the wild horse to run free was stronger in them than the training of man.

Presently the guide got to his feet, yawning, and began a systematic patrol of the outfit's night quarters. He traveled, cat-footed, down the Pass for a few hundred yards, then, retracing his steps, he walked about the same distance up the Pass in the direction Galland had gone.

An hour went by. The moon dropped down, leaving the Pass veiled in the darkness that precedes dawn. A deep stillness had settled over all, broken only by the light sigh of the early morning breeze, just freshening, or a soft neigh from one or another of the ponies.

In the course of one of his regular patrols down the Pass the guide caught a sound which sent him hurrying toward the patio. Someone, or something was stirring there. His first thought was that Galland had returned. Or else one of the boys was awake and moving about. He bounded into the middle of the patio, every faculty on the alert.

His first glance was toward the row of blanketed figures. Tony and Hal were already on their feet. There was no sign of Galland. It was nearer two hours than one since he had disappeared in the darkness.

"Something's stirring. But what?" Hal demanded. "I heard something in my sleep that woke me up. Don't know what it was, though."

"It was among the ponies! Someone walked among them! I am not to be deceived," Antonio called out excitedly. He was already going over the string of ponies to see that none were missing.

"*Ay, mi madre!* Comet is gone! He was tied last of the string and was nearest that end of the Pass. So it has been easy for—" he hesitated, then continued more quietly, "who but Señor Galland could have taken him from under our very noses?" His eyes met Norton's questioningly. "Perhaps you loaned him Comet, Señor Norton?"

"No, I did not," the guide answered very decidedly. "You fellows all heard him say he was going scouting up the Pass on foot. I saw him start out that way. Somebody nabbed Comet while I was patrolling that end of the Pass this last time. I heard a sound

and came back here on the jump. It's as Tony says. No one but Galland could have taken Comet so quietly. He's probably found he'd best go scouting pony-back and has come back for the cayuse while I was down the trail. He'll be here before long."

"The sky's growing light." David nodded toward the rapidly graying east. "We can hunt for Craig without his help, if he's dished us. Only good-by to Gam's horsie. Galland's a queer duck. He— Great Judas Priest!" David interrupted himself to exclaim. "Where's S. B.?"

"He was here a minute ago—" Kent came to an uncertain pause.

"Was he?" Hal asked doubtfully. "I can't recall seeing him with the gang since we got up. By George, I'll say he's followed Galland on foot. Over there's his horse. He'll not go far without his cayuse."

Shy Beaver's spirited brown pony, Ginger, stood tied next to Hidalgo. Ginger was the gift of Hartwell Craig to the Navajo chief, and Shy Beaver was inordinately proud of his fine horse.

Contrary to Norton's charitable supposition that Galland would soon return, the Texan did not reappear. Nor did old Shy

Beaver return to the fold. Concerned with this new feature of the expedition, Antonio and George speedily got breakfast for the outfit without stopping to exchange the usual amount of derisive pleasantries.

"What's the day's dope, Boss Norton?" asked Hal as the Long Trail Boys gathered around the guide after breakfast. "I mean, how are we going to carry on the hunt for Craig?" [

"Stick to the Pass for one thing," replied Norton. "Craig set the Pass as our meeting place. We'll keep this place for a camping site unless we find a better one farther along the way. Today we'll trail through the canyon to the entrance we came in. Then we'll come back here and go on up to the other end of the Pass. Tony, you can do that owl hoot as well as White Shadow. You'd better let it loose occasionally. It may be the means of calling White Shadow and Craig to us."

"We can write on two or three fungi and hang 'em to trees, too," Kent suggested. "S. Beaver is probably out hunting for some sign from White Shadow. He'll be back before night. It wouldn't surprise me to see Gam, Craig, and Emperor with them."

In spite of Kent's optimistic prediction the day passed and sundown came without either the return of Galland and Shy Beaver, or the longed-for appearance of Craig, Gam Fu, and the Yaqui chief. The outfit had traveled the canyon, known as Francisco Pass, with eyes trained for signs of the missing quartet of men. Tony had hooted frequently and realistically, Kent and David had scratched on three or four fungi a few words of a secret code which the Long Trail Boys had devised for their own use. But out of the stillness of the rock-shaded canyon had come no return hail from the absent men.

They were equally free from encounter with either Bolden or any of his desperados. During the long day of anxious, hopeful search they met no one. After a thorough canvass of the Pass Norton had advocated a return to the rocky patio in which they had spent the previous night. It was sufficiently inclosed to form a protection for the campers against hostile surprise invasions by rustlers. An attempt to run off the ponies would fail for the same reason, and undoubtedly create too much lively commotion to suit a rustler. How the Texan had managed to spirit Comet away was still a matter of wonder to the campers.

"I'm all fed up with Francisco Pass," grumbled Hal that evening. For the first time in almost a week the outfit were sitting around a low camp fire. "What in the name of Pete do you suppose has become of Gam and Craig? And where are old S. B. and White Shadow? Never mind about Galland. He may belong to Tigerface's gang after all. Mebbe? He acted like a four-cornered guy, but even Harold has been deceived in folks," Hal ended with one of his wide, impish smiles.

"Hard to tell about him." Norton shook his head. "I still think him on the square, but I can't say I like his methods. I dare say he'll return Comet, O.K. It's his way of dropping out of sight, horse and all, that I don't admire."

"How much longer are we going to stay here if Craig doesn't blow into camp?" David wanted to know.

"Not longer than tomorrow," the guide made firm answer. "Day after tomorrow morning we'll pull up stakes for Craig's property. We'll go over every foot of it. He may have been kidnaped by this gang of bandits. You know how it was in Oregon when the Gray Cloaks kidnaped him for a

ransom. White Shadow may be out hunting for him. I am banking on Shy Beaver to come back with information. Trust him to get it."

"He might have invited me to step out with him," was Hal's regretful comment. "Oh, wait till I see him coming into camp! I'll open up on that Navvy."

Usually full of funny sayings and good cheer, the group around the yellow camp fire flames was more or less silent. Not to see genial Hartwell Craig, their cheery companion of the trail, when they had arrived at Francisco Pass was a great disappointment to the other members of the loyal outfit. To know that his safety stood in jeopardy at the blood-stained hands of border ruffians was far harder to contemplate.

"I'd back White Shadow to win against the world." Kent broke a protracted lull in the camp-fire talk. "Craig is a dandy woodsman, but White Shadow—" Kent made an admiring pause.

"Suppose Señor Craig was captured by these bandits while he was riding Serapis, and White Shadow happened not to be near him at the time?" propounded Antonio. "It is as Señor Norton says. White Shadow may

now be hunting Señor Craig. He is, after all, but a man. Remember, it took him several weeks to find the bandits of el Halcon."

"Right you are, old wise Mejicano. And don't forget that Gam Fu is some scrapper. He'd put up a good fight for Craig, whether it was with a gun or an iron frying pan," George said with a reminiscent grin. "Remember that, too."

"If he happened to be with Craig," Hal reminded pertinently. "And that's the whole trouble. We're all at sea as to what's happened to any of that noted threesome. What I can't see is——"

"Hark!" Norton's low, imperative exclamation brought silence. Simultaneously he and Antonio had heard the same sound. The others had instantly assumed listening attitudes and were intently awaiting a repetition.

"Someone is coming down the Pass," Antonio breathed. The sound he and Norton had heard was the slight crack of a piece of brush under a human foot.

"Move back from the fire," cautioned the guide softly. "Don't give anyone a chance to pump you full of lead."

Next instant Antonio murmured: "I see him. He is coming toward us."

"Who are you?" Norton's deep challenge echoed on the night air.

"Who am I?" was flung back in laughter-choked tones which brought the boys of the Long Trail outfit to their feet with a joyful, concerted roar. "That's a *nice* question to throw at your *hermano*."

CHAPTER IX

THE UNKNOWN MESSENGER

“**C**RAIG, by all that’s wonderful!” Norton cleared the few feet between him and the missing ranchman at a bound.

“Yes, it’s Craig. I’ll excuse you for challenging me.” Hartwell Craig and the guide were wringing hands with a fervor that bespoke their feelings. The others had closed in about the pair, ready to grasp the hand of their missing *hermano* (brother).

“Where in Sam Hill have you been? What got you?” queried Hal as Craig came limping forward into the light of the camp fire attended by a delighted bodyguard. Hatless, unshaven, his clothing stained and ragged, hands and face scratched, a newly healed furrow on one cheek, the ranchman was a battered edition of his former distinguished self.

“Gee! We’ve certainly been up in the air about you.” David walked with a hand on Craig’s arm. “*Glad to see you! Better believe it.*” His face registered his utter affection for his foster uncle.

"Oh, Misser Craig, you certainly set the worry bug traveling round among us!" George yelled buoyantly. He began a high-stepping dance of rejoicing around Craig in which his comrades could not resist joining. Even Norton approved and allowed himself to be drawn willingly into the joyful capering of his flock.

Antonio broke away from the dance before it ended to make a hurried trip to where the ponies were tethered. He came back with an armful of blankets which he deftly arranged on a spot near the camp fire.

"For you, Señor Craig," he explained. "You must have come far on foot, and are very tired."

"I'm all in, Tony." Craig sank down gratefully upon the pile of blankets. "I've been wandering around on foot for three days trying to find this Pass. I've some camp-fire yarn to tell."

"Wait till you've been bucked-up and nourished by a good feed." Kent also had now dropped out of the jubilant dance and was making futile grabs at the still wildly prancing George.

"Here, cut out the joy hops and get busy with the frying pan. This is Georgie Fu, the

outfit's new cook. He's better than he looks. What about Gam? He's another missing *hermano* who's been keeping us awake nights." Kent's laughing features grew sober.

"I lost Gam three or four weeks ago." Craig got no further. A general loud lament went up at the information.

"Do you suppose Gam has been—" Hal stopped abruptly.

"I hope not. He may have found a good hiding place and is sticking to it till the coast is clear. He's pretty foxy. If I'd known what I know now about this region, I'd have made very different arrangements. I don't mean I wouldn't have come here. But I'd have sent for Clark Hamden. He and White Shadow could have each put a posse of men in the field and cleaned up this rustlers' nest, pronto." The ranchman's tones registered unbounded resentment.

"Where's White Shadow?" Norton made anxious inquiry. "Last letter I had from you he was with you."

"Agunta sent for him by telegram. The old fellow had some sort of disagreement with the directors of their bank and needed Emperor to straighten matters out for him."

"Did Emperor know that a bunch of killers were running the woods?" David asked.

"He knew there'd been plenty of rustling going on there, and gun scraps, too. But he also knew that I had come down to Texas to go over my property. I don't look much like a property owner, do I?" Craig smiled rather wanly.

"Shy Beaver had the number of this blot on the map. He told us it was a rustler's hang-out and a sheepmen and cattlemen's scrapping ground."

"Where is Shy Beaver?" Craig's question held a distinct note of apprehension. In the rush of greeting he had not noticed the Navajo's absence.

"You tell." Norton's response was full of dry emphasis. "He dropped out of camp just before daylight. I expect him back. Hard to say when." The guide's broad shoulders lifted. "He's gone scouting on his own. Things have been pretty lively around here, Craig. Of course, nothing like the siege you've been through. You certainly are carrying the marks of a hard deal." The guide regarded his partner of the trail with deep concern.

"I wonder I'm here." Craig gave a short, mirthless laugh. "I've been shot at until I've begun to believe that I bear a charmed life.

This is a mark one of these Texan wolves gave me." His fingers came to rest lightly upon the newly healed furrow in one cheek. "But that's the least of my troubles. The greatest is"—Craig sighed audibly—"Serapis. The rustlers stole him on the same night that Gam disappeared."

"*Serapis!*" arose in a concerted, despairing cry from Craig's listeners. A battery of sympathetic eyes became fastened upon the ranchman. Serapis was the dearest of all Hartwell Craig's possessions.

"I'll never rest till I have him back," Craig vowed vehemently. "I'll not leave this section of the country till I have him again. More than that, I'll start things moving to clear this territory of rustlers if it costs me every dollar I have in the world." He leaned excitedly forward, emphasizing each word with a shake of his finger.

"There's a fine bunch of long riders, rustlers, road agents, horse thieves, and other distinguished snatchers down here," put in Hal. "Oh, boy, let me in on that grand clean-up. Don't forget your *hermano*, Little Brent, Misser Craig."

"Or your *hermano*, Mejicano," put in Antonio.

The rest of the outfit were equally quick to volunteer.

"We've a quart of beans of our own that need spilling," Hal said with buoyant good humor. "Oh, gee, Misser Craig, it's a good thing you happened along." He treated the returned wanderer to a wide, affectionate smile.

"I'll say it is," Craig returned with grim humor. "I'm here, and hungry. What cheer?"

"How about biscuits, bacon, and coffee. I made some bang-up bikkies for supper. Good? Ugh!"

"Great!" Craig's sunny, fascinating smile broke out, relieving the weary tensity of his thin, unshaven face.

While George and Hal hastily built up a small cook fire and made coffee, Tony fried a pan of bacon at one end of the camp fire. Then he opened a small can of pineapple which he had been hoarding in his knapsack in honor of their lately missing comrade.

Norton was already deep in a recital of all that had befallen the outfit since the members had crossed the New Mexico line into Texas, when the three boys brought Craig his supper. He sat listening to the guide with an intensity

of interest, interrupting only briefly with a question or exclamation.

"Great guns, but that coffee and bacon smell good," Craig sniffed the savory air with hungry anticipation. "Watch me wolf my supper. I've had not a scrap of anything to eat since yesterday morning. Then I had only a piece of stewed rabbit that was thrown at me."

"Go ahead, eat," Norton urged. The boys seconded his concerned injunction to the hungry man. Tony had already placed his own folding coffee cup, full of the steaming beverage, in the ranchman's hand. Hal was at his left offering him a heaped up plate of crisp bacon and puffy brown biscuits.

"Ah-h-h, that's good." Craig had taken a long drink of coffee. "A regular life-saver."

"Get outside that plate of chuck and another cup of coffee before you tell us what happened to you. Someone has certainly been trying to put you out of business." Norton's relief at seeing Craig shone in his face.

"All my own fault," Craig declared. "But you'd have done the same as I. You know, Norton, when a fellow has traveled all over the world by himself there's no use in trying

to warn him against danger in a certain direction. If he's made up his mind to go in that direction, he'll go, and let nothing nor no one stop him."

"*Verdad*," Tony nodded seriously.

"Nobody but the Long Trail infants have to mind," declared George flippantly. "If I made any plans to go hunting all by myself, Boss Norton would put the kibosh on 'em."

"Remember that, all of you, and stick together down here," Norton said energetically.

"Yes, siree." Craig wagged a forceful head. "It's going to be a case of 'united we stand, divided we fall,' until this robber's paradise is cleaned up. I'm going to El Paso as soon as I can, and wire Hamden in his code. I certainly will be glad if Emperor can get back to us, pronto. I've had trouble enough at the hands of these fiends. I'll rid the region of them once and for all." His inflection was stern and purposeful.

"Looks as though we might see some dandy scraps," Hal laughed, but his eyes flashed at the prospect of exciting days ahead for the outfit.

"Thanks to Galland, we've steered clear of scraps thus far." The guide cast Hal a

glance of pretended disapproval. "But some fellows never know when they're well off," he finished with dry humor.

Hal merely grinned at this mild thrust. "Think of the experience we've gained," he retorted.

"This fellow Galland seems to have proved himself on the level by sticking to you when the rustlers opened fire on you," was Craig's opinion.

"I believe he's straight, even if he has walked off with Comet. Galland must have taken the horse. Shy Beaver's pony is with the others. He went away on foot," the guide said.

"Catch S. B. taking any cayuse but his own," Kent cut in.

"Galland is no outlaw. He seems to hate Bolden too hard to be one of his gang." This from David, who expressed few opinions. Those he voiced were usually reflectively to the point.

"After we had hauled Galland up from that tree on the cliff side, and he'd flashed out about Bolden, I wondered if it mightn't be a case of thieves falling out. I soon changed my mind. He's a queer duck. But then," Norton smiled whimsically, "show me a

woodsman who isn't. They are full of odd kinks. I'll bet Galland's as able a ranchman as Craig, and as good a woodsman as I."

"Nope. The Nevada Hermit's in a class by himself," Hal contradicted loyally. "Try not to think of yourself as a dumb-bell," he advised Norton.

"Oh, you go on!" The guide had a rooted prejudice against compliments.

"Gee, you're appreciative," Hal told him.

"By jinks, it's good to be here!" Craig exclaimed as he finished the third cup of coffee and lighted the filled pipe Norton had ready to hand him. "It's worth some hardships to get back with the gang again."

The Long Trail Boys watched him with happy satisfaction as he sat enjoying the comfort of his first smoke for many days. While they were impatient to learn what had befallen Craig when on the way to Francisco Pass, they put a curb on their curiosity until he should have eaten and rested.

"We feel the same about having you here." Kent's hearty assurance was a part of the babel of good will that arose. "What's the Long Trail outfit without Misser Craig? Three cheers for old Pleasant Brave. Hip, hip, hur-rah-h!"

A spirited burst of cheering awoke the echoes in the still night woods. Out upon the darkness was wafted the outfit's own yell, "We are, we are, we are the Long Trail Boys."

"I don't doubt but that every bandit in this section of the state knows it, too," was Norton's half rebuke as quiet gradually descended again.

"'Scuse us, Greenwood Gilbert, and blame it all to me," apologized Hal gaily. "Cut out the caution bug when the wanderer wanders into camp. Ahem! Our 'esteem fren,' Misser Craig, is going to tell us why and how he lost his hat, ragged his clothes and neglected to trim his whiskers. Go to it, *hermano*. Can't you see we're ready to blow up with curiosity?"

"You're going to know right now." Craig flashed a smile of glad comradeship around the old familiar circle. "I'll begin with White Shadow. He found a telegram from Agunta when we came to El Paso. The one I mentioned a while ago about the disagreement with the bank. It meant he'd have to start for Mexico, pronto. I'd already written you, Norton, about the Pass. White Shadow had dictated the directions and how to get here. We were going to buy the burros and supplies

in Vaquero, a two by four village not many miles from the Pass. Of course, Agunta's telegram put the kibosh on the plan."

"I can just see Great Chief Agunta on his ear at the bank," Kent chuckled, "and sending for Emperor to come and lay down the law to the directors."

"Emperor didn't want to go, but you know how Agunta is, and how White Shadow humors him," Craig continued. "I told him Gam and I would push on alone to the Pass, Then when he joined the outfit we would all make a trip to Vaquero for supplies and burros. He looked very solemn about it, and I finally asked him what the matter was. Then he told me he had heard bad reports of the territory near my ranch; that it was full of rustlers and border scum. He had not traveled it for several years, but it had been a thieves' country then. His Yaqui idea of minding his own business wouldn't let him urge me not to go on with Gam. He knew that in my place he would do just as I'd already decided to do—hit up a pace for the Pass. He was worried about Serapis, too. Three or four times he warned me to guard Serapis. Gam had a good pony, one that Emperor had picked for him from Emerald

Valley stock. Gam named the cayuse Chico. He and Chico were snaked off together."

"We wondered why Comet was still at Sweet Water," cut in David. "We brought Comet along anyhow. You know, we've often needed an extra pony on these trips and couldn't find the right sort. The L. T. B's are particular. Besides, we packed some stuff on him without hurting his horse self-respect."

"We thought probably White Shadow had dazzled Gam's eyes with some superior kind of cayuse," Kent said. "Now Gam and Chico and Comet are all gone. A nice state of affairs for the L. T. B's, isn't it?"

"We've lost our cook, and he's lost his horsies. Now add Shy Beaver to the list of strays." George held up four fingers.

"Oh, there's hope in his case." Hal raised his right arm, index finger pointing pertinently upward. "He's a fox."

"Gam is no fat-head," Kent defended. "That China boy is just plain lucky. Betcha he'll come shuffling along yet, right side up with care. Tell us some more of your horrible tale, Craig. Don't mind if I kid you a little."

"Mind!" Craig laughed happily. "Keep it up. I'm thankful to be here to hear you."

"Cut out the cheering, though," counseled the guide. He divined that his irrepressible flock were getting ready to launch another jubilant outburst in honor of Craig.

"You win, Boss Norton. Pack up the whoops, gang," Hal lightly ordered his too-ready pals. "Onward, ever onward, Misser Craig."

"Where was I at? Oh, yes. White Shadow said he'd try to be at the Pass before the tenth, so as to give it the once-over. I had planned to put in the time till then going over my own property. It's almost twenty-five miles from one end of my ranch to the other. I knew I was in for some surveying.

"After White Shadow left us Gam and I started on our own way. We had to go a little slow, following the route Emperor had mapped out for us. We'd been trailing for four days through the woods along a high ridge when two masked men held us up. It was just beginning to get dark. They jumped out from behind trees and pulled guns on us. I backed Serapis, and the wise, splendid fellow reared up on his hind legs and tried to land on 'em."

"Sh-h-h," admonished Norton as a swelling

murmur of admiration threatened to break bounds.

"Some horse!" broke from David and Kent together.

"You'd better believe he is." Craig's eyes glowed with pride in his thoroughbred. "The pair tried to dodge our fire. They kept popping away at us, too. I put one's pistol hand out. I know that." There was anything but regret in Craig's inflection.

"Gee, but you've turned blood-thirsty." George wagged his head disapprovingly at Craig.

"Wrong. I didn't aim to kill once. I'd have been conferring a favor on the state of Texas if I had. Take another look at me if you don't believe I met with bad medicine," was the ranchman's quick retort.

"Gam had thrown a gun on the other fellow, but he's a poor marksman when he's excited. The yeggs were on foot and we made it so hot for them they finally turned and ran. We sent a few shots after them, but they'd had enough, and they ducked for cover. After that we kept on going until long past midnight without getting into any more fracas. We stopped around one o'clock for a night snack and to rest and water the

horses. Then we took turns watching, and each of us had a couple of hours of sleep before daybreak.

"When I woke up it was light. Gam had made some coffee and fixed some dried-beef sandwiches. We wolfed the chuck and put what was left of the coffee into a water bottle. We trailed along for a couple of days and never saw sign of a bandit. One evening a little before twilight Gam was cooking some rice over a low fire. All of a sudden he let out one of his queer shrill yells and threw the pan of rice up into the air. Then he started to run like a scared rabbit. I began bellowing at him loudly enough to be heard a mile, I'd say. I knew, if my voice got across his scare to him, he'd slow down for a stop. I kept up that yell till I thought I'd split my throat. But he got it. I had to take him by one arm and walk him back to our camp."

"Don't I know that, Chinee?" Hal laughed reminiscently. "I had my own troubles with Misser Fu about the scarlet sign. You fellows remember how he tried to turn inside out when we decorated him with it for winning a horse race. He was sure the scarlet sign was out to do us up brown. What got his Chinese goat this time, Craig?"

"Oh, he declared that while he was cooking rice he happened to look up and there in the bushes he saw a Chinese demon watching him. He said it had a terrible face with a long chin and burning, black eyes and a long nose, too. He was sure it had no hair; that the top of its head was bald. It smiled at him, it seems, and that's what sent the rice up in the air. He said nobody but a demon could smile like the way the thing he saw had smiled.

"We trained our revolvers on the spot where he'd seen the thing and went over to it. It was beginning to be pretty shadowy, but we could still see among the trees and bushes. There wasn't a soul in the bushes. They didn't show having been pushed aside, and they weren't broken. It had taken a pretty slick fellow to get away without our seeing him go, too. We had hardly taken our eyes off that thicket from the time Gam yelled."

"The fellow probably backed away snake fashion," the guide said. "The Indians can do that crawl to perfection, and without scarcely moving a leaf of the bushes."

"I suppose he faded out that way," Craig admitted with an accent of self-chagrin. "It doesn't say much for me as a woodsman."

"Cheer up, Pleasant Brave. Think of

the job you were up against. Smoothing down Gam's flutterings was no cinch, I'll say," Hal asserted waggishly.

"That's what I thought," Craig agreed, half grimly. "Well, we were going to give up hunting for Gam's Chinese demon when I caught sight of something white tied to a sapling and about four feet up the trunk. This is what I found."

Amid a battery of eagerly curious eyes Craig's hand went to the breast pocket of his blue flannel blouse. He brought out something folded in an oblong and proceeded to unfold it. Watching, his comrades saw the oblong resolve itself into a dirty white banner about two feet long and six inches wide.

"Read it." Craig offered it to Norton, who took it in both hands and stared curiously at the quavering reddish-brown writing extending across one side of the makeshift banner. Then he read aloud:

"'Go back whence you came. Leave this devil's region to the ones who understand it best. Death awaits you here. The Unknown Messenger.'"

CHAPTER X

CRAIG'S STORY

“**T**HE ‘Unknown Messenger,’” Hal repeated derisively. “Can you beat that for a thriller?”

“Gam’s demon is as square as the average rattler. He warns before he strikes.” David finished his inspection of the warning banner and passed it on to Antonio. In the bright glow of the camp fire the campers had been able to decipher it easily.

In his usual methodical way Antonio brought his flash light to bear upon the strip of cloth as he smoothed it out across his knees.

“*Santos cielos* (Heavens)!” broke from him with sharp explosiveness. “Look, Señor Norton. This message was written in human blood. I believe it was. *Ciertamente* (without doubt)!” He pointed out several odd little reddish-brown splotches scattered here and there over the soiled white field.

“Right-o,” Norton was of a similar opinion after another shrewd examination of the banner. “There’s nothing wrong with your eyes, Tony.”

"It was only because I happened to think it might be so," Tony depreciated. "I have heard that Mexican bandits often do this."

"Some nut tree has furnished the woods with a nut," was Hal's characteristic view of the originator of the gruesome banner. "I'll bet the fellow Gam thought was a demon had on a loco-looking false face. It would go pretty well with his message."

The gruesome writing furnished the outfit with material for a rapid exchange of opinions, most of them ridiculous and punctuated with laughter.

"You fellows don't take this business of a mysterious messenger any more seriously than I did when I found this white rag tied to the sapling. Since then I've learned one thing. The fellow who wrote it in natural red ink knew some things, even if he was a nut." Craig glanced somberly from one familiar face to another. "The very next evening, near sunset, Gam was frying some fish we'd caught that day in a dandy little trout stream, and I was not very far away from him, cleaning my rifle. I'd let the cleaning of it go all day because I wanted to fish and was hustling to be done with it before dark.

"All of a sudden I heard Gam set up his

steam whistle yell and I jumped up from the ground and hot-footed it over to the brook. It wasn't more than a couple of hundred yards from me, but a clump of bushes hid Gam from me. He was jumping up and down and pointing across the brook to a thicket of scrub oak. He'd dropped his trout line and a big speckled beauty was lugging it off through the water. Queer how a person will notice a thing like that when something else is stirring.

"He told me that he had seen the demon again, peeking at him from the thicket across the brook. He declared that this time it had spoken to him in a terrible, growling voice. He was positive that it said it would only give us one more chance to go away. If we didn't turn around and go back the way we had come we should be sorry. If we would go that way he would hide us from our enemy.

"I knew Gam had seen the fellow again, whoever and whatever he was, but I wasn't so sure he'd heard him speak. I hadn't heard sound of a voice myself, but I wasn't likely to with Gam squealing like a stuck pig. Gam was positive he heard the fellow talk, so I took his word for it and we waded across the brook and beat up the thicket. As usual, no

demon. We didn't find any more blood-written messages, either.

"But the next day"—Craig paused with a deep, dejected breath—"a gang of rustlers came down on us late in the afternoon and that was the last I saw of Gam. They grabbed Chico and ran Gam off with his arms roped to his sides. I put up the best fight there was in me to hold Serapis against them. If only I'd been nearer to him, I'd have been on his back in a twinkling. I'd have tried to pick up Gam before he was roped and we might have made our get-away. I'd have tried it mighty hard. But there wasn't a ghost of a show. They tied me up, same as they tied Gam. The leader of the gang was a regular giant, with one of the meanest faces I ever saw in a man's head. He was nothing but a great brute beast. When he spoke he showed his teeth like fangs. He was surly as a tiger. I didn't hear him speak a decent word to one of his men."

"Tigerface!" Hal, Kent, and David shouted out Hal's appropriate title for Dirke Bolden, the Texan bandit.

"No wonder you look ragged and run down at the heels," sympathized Hal. "The robber who snapped you up is this fiend, Bolden, the enemy of the Texan, Galland."

"I never once heard his name. He kept me penned in a vile old cellar for nearly three weeks." Craig showed mingled amazement and interest at Hal's revelation. "I dug my way out with an old piece of an iron bar and my hunting knife. The yegg who took my guns was so crazy about them that he forgot to take my knife. The minute my arms were free I hid it in a seam pocket of my blouse. I had that kind of pocket put in all my blouses to keep money in."

"Was it Bolden himself who shut you in the cellar?" was Hal's eager question.

"No, a big Mexican he called Manuel fired me into it," Craig answered. "As near as I could tell these two were supposed to be running mates. But Manuel was strictly out for himself. After I'd been penned in two days, had had one meal, and that was nothing but a few *frijoles* (beans), he came around and said he would help me out of the cellar and show me how to go free from *el Capitan* (the captain) if I would write to my banker in the states and have sent to him, Manuel Uribe, a paper writing that was for fifty thousand dollars. He said he could easily find out if the paper I gave him was good. If it were, then he would help me escape."

"He would have accepted the check for fifty thousand, Señor Craig, and pinged you in the back at the first good chance that offered itself," Tony said wisely. "For this bad trait I am sorry sometimes to be Meji-cano."

"Yes, it worries me about you sometimes," George agreed very soberly. "I never know when I may be pinged in the back with a tin can, or a pair of sneakers, or even a stale biscuit. You're not the only one, either. Lots of so-called woodsmen are as treacherous as some Mejicanos."

"Now see what you've done, Meji-cano," David told Tony in disgust. "Drown him out, Craig. Go ahead with the dope."

"Oh, there isn't much more to tell except that this big fellow Bolden came down cellar after I'd been there a few days and told me quite a lot about myself. I mean, in the way of being a ranchman and being rich, and all that sort of stuff. He said that I should never keep the land I'd bought because there had been a flaw in the title and that it belonged to another man. He claimed that Campbell, the former owner of the land, had stolen it from a man by force and murdered the fellow afterward. He said Galland was

a cutthroat, and at the head of a bunch of crooked Texans who had stolen a large tract of land from him.

"I said I was willing to have the title to my land searched, but what I wanted first was my horse, my guns, and my freedom. He began showing his teeth then. He saw that bunk would not do any longer. Then he came out with his fifty-thousand-dollar proposition. He declared that Serapis was his horse and had been stolen from his stable over three years before. I laughed in his face and told him he and Manuel were both loco.

"He looked black as a thundercloud and asked me what Manuel had to do with it. I told him Manuel was after the same fifty thousand on his own hook. He was furious. He made a jump at me and caught me by the shoulders, showing his teeth at me like a wild beast. Then he grabbed me by the throat and threatened to choke the life out of me if I wouldn't give in about the fifty thousand, pronto."

"Some necking party," was Hal's ironic comment.

"Only Bolden had the wrong man by the neck," Antonio said. "Señor Craig would never give in. He would fight to the last."

"You're right, Mejicano. I'd have fought it out to a finish with him," Craig asserted, his face darkening with unpleasant reminiscence. "I never met an uglier brute of a man. He saw I was full of fight, and he let go my throat all of a sudden and said he'd give me till the next evening to change my mind. If I wasn't ready then to come across he'd find a way to make me. He said he'd put Manuel with the snakes, where he belonged, and me along with him. Then he rushed away—to hunt up Manuel, maybe. I hoped he and Manuel would begin a scrap over the fifty thousand business and forget me long enough so that I could make a get away."

"Thoughtfully put each other out of business," George suggested genially.

"Something like that," smiled the ranchman. "Neither of them came back. I expected Bolden, but he stayed away. Instead of Manuel, a big fellow with a hang-dog look and a scar halfway across one cheek brought me a few scraps to eat and an occasional bucket of water. He pretended not to know any English except 'water' and 'what.' But I think he was faking. Most of these greasers on this side of the border can talk English fast enough."

"He'd probably had orders from Bolden to keep shut-mouth," was Hal's quick surmise. "Maybe he stood in line to be bumped off if he started any of Manuel's tactics."

"So I concluded. He was an ugly-looking customer. What the Spanish call '*bruto*' (animal stupidity). He watched me like a hawk. I'd found a gap in the stone part of the cellar wall and had started to dig my way out. It was an old cellar and had a foundation wall of pieces of stone. The stone had broken away in places and left the dirt wall. The place I was digging at was in one corner of the blamed hole. It was dark as pitch. Not a sign of a window. I never knew whether it was day or night. The only way I had of learning anything about the dump was when these greasers brought me food or water. They carried lanterns, good-sized ones. I certainly made good use of my eyes when those lanterns were on the job. I'd fix some part of the cellar in my mind while I could still see it. As soon as my jailers were gone I'd try to find it myself in the dark."

"Jerusalem crickets, but you had a tough proposition to buck against!" Kent wagged his head with emphatic sympathy.

"A nice stamping ground for tarantulas,

snakes, and rats." David made a gesture of repulsion.

"I was afraid of being stung by a tarantula or a copperhead," Craig replied. "A rattler in that hole would have given warning, but you know how a copperhead will stretch out straight as a string and get you before you know one's around. And one of those tarantulas! They're an animated bunch of poison gone loco. I had a good stout stick and I used to beat up any part of the cellar I happened to want to go into before I set foot in it. Rats I wasn't afraid of in the way one hates a reptile. I had nothing they wanted to eat, and they didn't seem to fancy eating me," was the ranchman's humorous opinion.

"I'd been working like sixty at my pet corner of the cellar, and had finally dug away the dirt till I had an opening large enough to let in the light. The hole was about as large then as one of the granite-ware plates we eat from. I'd found a piece of broken stone loose enough to pull out of the cellar wall, and it fitted over the opening so far as I had dug.

"Oh, it was a joy to take a look outside, even though I couldn't see much! I got my first glimpse of light again one morning just at daybreak. I hadn't dared make the open-

ing any larger until I was nearer ready to escape. I guessed I was in the cellar of some sort of outbuilding, either of stone or adobe. I could see a little of what I took to be a field. I had to close the opening then, for fear some of Bolden's gang might come around and notice it. I thought I'd wait till after the big greaser had brought me some water and some kind of poor excuse for food. I thought I'd wait an hour after he'd gone before I began digging again. If the dirt gave way easily, I'd try to make my get away that very night."

"You had nerve, Misser Craig; cast-iron, triple-plated nerve." Hal's tone registered his admiration of Craig's intrepid spirit.

"How could you possibly know that you wouldn't be popped over the minute you got out of the cellar, or before you'd gone a dozen yards from it? Catch Bolden letting a prize like you vamos," asserted George.

"I couldn't know, of course, and I didn't stop to think about that side of it. I had a desperate feeling that something especially bad was hanging over me, and I must escape that night. And now you'll hear the strange part of my story, so strange that if it weren't for the proof I have of it, I'd say it had never happened to me."

CHAPTER XI

UNDER COVER OF THE NIGHT

THE flickering, wavering orange and red flames of the camp fire played upon a circle of faces touched by the dramatic intensity of Craig's recital. The lately imprisoned man was living over his hard experience as he told it to his absorbed comrades.

"The greaser guard used to come to the cellar after dark. I mean when he came a second time during the day. It had been all darkness to me, but I had managed to pick from him in Spanish whether it was day or night when he came. After he had gone a second time I knew it was fairly safe to go on digging. It was a slow job." Craig sighed reminiscently. "I'll never forget how good it seemed to see light on the morning I broke through. I was determined to go that night. All day I kept at it and took observations whenever I dared.

"I guessed that Bolden and his gang were far from there, for through the day I never heard sound of either horse or man. Some-

where in the offing I could hear cattle lowing. I was crazy to get my head outside the hole and see what I could. I half-poked it out once, but got cold feet and jerked it back again. Nothing bad came of it, and I began to hope that there hadn't been a guard posted."

Impressed by what he was about to reveal to his expectant comrades, Craig leaned far forward, his eyes sweeping the circle of tense listeners.

"Seven o'clock in the evening came, as nearly as I could calculate the time. It was still daylight. I went over to take another observation and—" he paused briefly.

"You got caught at it," George supplemented.

"No, sir. I found, instead, a queer-looking little green bundle in front of the opening. It was of big leaves pinned together with thorns and rolled up in a ball. I poked it with my stick. It didn't move. Then I closed the opening and waited a little. I was afraid it was a decoy. I knew I couldn't wait very long, or it would be dark. Then I'd not be able to tell a thing about what was in the bundle. Finally I reached out of the hole and pulled the green bundle in. I left my

window open and ripped off the leaves in a hurry. Under them was a piece of light brown wrapping paper with red-brown writing on it."

"Good evening, star!" [burst excitedly from Hal.

"Some story!" David flashed an affectionate glance at his foster uncle. "Every word a complete surprise."

"Cut out the butting in," complained Kent laughingly. "Go ahead, Craig. What was in the bundle?"

"Yes, spill the mystery of the grass-green package," George declaimed with a dramatic sweep of the arm that caught Kent in the chest and raised a lively protest from him.

"There was a small flash light, two boxes of safety matches, two cakes of chocolate, and a big brass key," Craig named the contents of the bundle so unexpectedly bestowed upon him.

"What did the Unknown Messenger write you, Señor Craig?" Antonio put in curiously. "Since the paper had red-brown writing, it must have again been written in blood."

"It was," nodded Craig. "I know it for a fact now. I wish I could quote you the letter, word for word?"

"Where is it?" Hal asked eagerly. "Don't

say you haven't it tucked in some corner of your clothes."

"Nope. I haven't." Craig shook his head. "You see, the last of the writing was: 'I have helped you as best I can; as one honest man helps another to escape from murderers. Destroy this paper. I write in my own blood. The Unknown Messenger.' That much of the writing I found I had down pat, but the rest of it was more or less rambling."

A general buzz of interested comment had ascended from the others as the ranchman finished quoting from the mysterious communication he had received.

"How did it start?" Hal was all eagerness over the melodramatic message.

"I know the first words of it, too. It began: 'Try to get out of the cellar tonight. No one but I has seen you digging. Bolden is away robbing and murdering.' After that the sentences were more or less mixed and rather vague." Craig knitted his heavy brows in an effort to recall the mysterious message.

"It was about Bolden coming back next day and torturing me if I was still in the cellar. The end for me would be the bed of hot coals, or the den of snakes if I didn't come across with a ransom. Then it went on about

Serapis and called him a wonder horse. The brass key was the key of the stable, and Serapis was in the stable. I was advised not to try for him, though. My unknown friend wrote that there were two rustlers on guard at the stable. Then he wrote something kind of wild about Serapis staying in the stable until I came for him, for I was the only one who could get him, and that the judgment of Heaven was soon to wipe Bolden off the map. I certainly hoped it might." Craig flashed his familiar good-humored smile at his companions.

"The matches and the flash light were a godsend," Craig continued. "First thing I did was eat the chocolate. I'd been hungry so long I'd grown used to an empty stomach. I closed my new window and started to explore the cellar with the flash light. There wasn't much in it except a heap of old straw sombreros piled upon a couple of fruit crates. I poked my stick in among them and started a rat to running, but no snakes or tarantulas came out at me. I found that part of the floor was adobe, but so dirty you couldn't tell it easily from the ground. I picked up a pack of playing cards and an iron candlestick with about two inches of wax candle in it.

I grabbed it, glad to save my battery. There wasn't anything else in the cellar besides my bed, and that was an old horse blanket.

"I sat down cross-legged on my bed and read over the letter. Then I touched a match to it. After that I stowed away the matches, the key and the flash light in my pockets. I knew the greaser was likely to drift along any time after dark. He always came pretty early, never stayed long and never came back the same night. I used to wonder if he was on guard outside. He came about nine, as nearly as I could judge. He brought me a dish of *frijoles* (beans). They were sour. That was the last meal served me in Starvation Dungeon. I waited till he'd been gone an hour, then I sailed into the digging. It got easier all the time and I had a hole dug big enough to crawl through before midnight. I'd dig a while, then I'd cover up the hole with a board I had found. I knew it would go hard with me if I was caught."

"We owe Bolden one," David threatened vengefully. His affection for Craig as his first friend in need made him resent with additional bitterness the bad treatment his benefactor had received at the outlaw's hands.

"I owe him one myself, boy," Craig

assured his former protégé. "He's not going to miss anything that's coming to him, either. Well, to wind up my yarn, while I was busy digging I heard a deep, quiet kind of voice say: 'Go in one hour, at midnight. Follow the direction of your right arm stretched even with your shoulder as you come out of the cellar!' Of course, it gave me an awful start. I slammed the board into place, made a misstep backward and sat down hard on the cellar floor. I soon got up again and went to the opening. I pulled the board back a little and said, 'Who are you?' It was moonlight, but I couldn't see anyone. Then the voice I'd heard a while before said again, 'I am a friend.' I asked, 'How shall I know that?' There was no answer for a minute, then the voice came back with. 'I wrote you in my own blood. One honest man helps another to escape from murderers. Keep the key of the stable. Do not go there now. Do you believe that I am your friend?' 'Yes,' I said, 'Where are you?' He answered with, 'You may not see me now, but we shall meet before long. Do not stop to search for me. Farewell. Follow my counsel.' And that was the last word I had from the Unknown Messenger."

CHAPTER XII

WHEN THE WHITE OWL HOOTED

“**O**H, cheesecakes! Why didn’t all that happen to me?” George set up a doleful complaint.

A deep stillness had descended upon the group around the fire, following Craig’s repetition of the enigmatic words of the Unknown Messenger. George’s regretful cry loosened the tongues of the other trailers.

“Truth is stranger than fiction,” was Kent’s impressed, though trite, opinion. “Where do you suppose the fellow was when he talked with you?”

“I didn’t know then, and I haven’t figured that out yet,” Craig answered. “His voice sounded very close to where I was digging. When I got out of the cellar, that was soon after he had spoken to me, the moon was bright and I could see around me fairly well. I’d been in the cellar of an old adobe hut, a squat, one-story affair. It was away back from what I took to be the stable of the ranch house. The land around this hut was

flat, with a tall growth of coarse grass and a few trees and bushes. There was no place near the hut that I could see where a man might hide. It was a puzzle."

"There was, *quizas* (perhaps), a *cisterno* (cistern), Señor Craig," Tony now guessed. "One that was dried out and had not held water for a long time. This fellow may have had the camouflaged cover for it which he could pull over himself. He may have been hidden in a niche in the wall of the *cisterno*."

"By George, I never thought of that! I'll bet you are right about it, Tony." Craig was instantly struck by Antonio's conjecture.

Norton added his agreeing opinion. "Don't doubt in the least but that the fellow was tucked away in some such burrow," he said. "He was there to do you a good turn, though. No mistake about it."

"Yes; I had faith in him somehow," Craig responded. "I took his advice and stretched out my right arm as he'd directed when I came from the cellar. My trail led away from the ranch house and toward a piece of woodland. It was all flat fields till I came to the woods. I'd go a few yards then dodge behind a bush, when I could find one, to see if I was being followed, or if anybody was

stirring there besides myself. I was thankful to reach the cover of the woods. I kept on going at a good clip. I knew I had to put distance between me and Bolden. All the time I was wondering if you fellows had found the Pass. According to Bolden, it belongs to him. He— —”

“But according to Galland, it belongs to the Galland estate,” broke in David. “Maybe in the long run it’ll be discovered that it belongs to your land,” he added, laughing.

“Nope, not mine. I can say that much now. At the time I bought this Texas land I had surveyors verify my holdings. Of course, since I stayed away from it so long, Bolden probably thought it would be easy to grab the property. What I know of him from personal experience is more than enough to make me believe that he has no right to anything but a noose around his neck, or a close acquaintance with a firing squad.”

“Unless I should happen to go hunting and shoot him by mistake for a tiger,” put in Hal lightly but with an undercurrent of determination. “You’ve not finished your story, Misser Craig.”

“There’s not much more to tell. I traveled all that night and the next day without a

morsel to eat. I filled up on water and tried to forget that I was hungry. I could have caught a rabbit and killed it with my knife, but I couldn't bear to do it. I was all in, and felt chicken-hearted. If I had killed one I'd have had nothing to cook it in, and I'm no cook, either," he reminded his comrades ruefully.

"I traveled the second night until about midnight, then I hid among some saplings and lay down for a sleep. It was getting light when something hit me plump in the face, and woke me up. It fell in among the bushes and I fished it up and found half of a cooked rabbit wrapped in a piece of brown paper. I gave it a once-over. It might be poisoned, but it looked good to me."

"The Unknown Guy must have been trailing you," Kent said. "Nobody but a friend would have treated you to cooked rabbit."

"He must have been on the job from the night I got out of the cellar," was the ranchman's opinion. "But he was a slick proposition. I never once caught sight of him. In fact, you fellows are the first persons I've seen since the last time the Mex came to the cellar with the sour beans. I'd say it was pure luck that brought me to the outfit safely, but it's

more than that. The Unknown must have had my get away all planned out when he called to me while I was in the cellar. You see, I followed the direction my right arm pointed when I came up out of the cellar. That was due south. I tried to keep on going south with no deviation. I was more or less confused when I struck the upper end of this canyon, but I managed to get here O.K."

"Exactly as your friend Misser Dizzy Red Ink said you would," George could not refrain from naming Craig's unknown friend to suit his flippant fancy.

"Right-o." Craig grinned his appreciation of lively George. "He showed me the trail back to the gang."

For an hour or more the Long Trailers continued to circle the camp fire, asking their returned comrade endless questions and discussing their own plans generally. Craig was of the mind to try to reach his ranch house as soon as possible. He had had explicit directions from White Shadow regarding the way to it from Francisco Pass.

"I can't be in for anything but trouble with this killer, Bolden, since he has Serapis." Craig's jaws set in the stern line which meant

unalterable purpose with him. "I know you fellows will stand by me, so I might as well say 'we.' "

" 'We' it must be," Norton assured his partner of the trail.

"Do I live to hear it!" Hal threw up his hands. "Help! Help! Boss Norton says we've got to scrap. Oh, mamma! We'll wipe up Texas with Tigerface."

"Understand, Hal, we aren't going to start any scraps," Norton wagged a warning head at too-ready Hal. "If we should be attacked, don't fire on Bolden or any of his gang except strictly in self-defense. I'm in hopes White Shadow will be back soon. I'm in favor of putting him and his men down here to clear up the rustlers. He has authority to act for the government in such cases. The way things are now, I'll say we'll be better off at the ranch house."

"Maybe Bolden and his gang will track Craig down and try to kidnap him again. We'd have some sport then letting 'em know we were on the map. How does it feel to be kidnaped for a ransom, Craig? Oh, beeswax, why have I been left out of the kidnaping racket?" Hal demanded regretfully.

"What about the time you were lugged off

by Freako?" Kent reminded. "That was some kidnaping, I'll say."

"Oh, he was a nut, not a bandit," Hal retorted disdainfully. "Craig's had a lovely experience among the bold bad men of the far West."

"I like to hear you say it," the ranchman flung back grimly, then laughed. "I'm not keen on having any more such experiences. Spend a few weeks, as I did, in a dark cellar and you'll befed up on that kind of adventure."

"Ugh. Mebbe." Hal continued to grin unbelievably at Craig.

"Queer about old Shy——"

Came a sudden interruption to Craig's half-uttered speech which sent a startled murmur around the circle.

"Emperor!" With the low exclamation Hal sent up an owl call in answer to the mournful hoot of an owl which had just died out on the night air. He was puzzled when no answer came to the call he had given.

"Gee, was that a real owl I was trying to get sociable with?" he demanded, half abashed. Happening to glance at Antonio, he saw that the Mexican was laughing. "What in Sam Hill?" he continued. "Come across, Mejicano."

"Listen." Tony sent out an owl call exactly like the one Hal had sounded. It was the call White Shadow himself had taught the boys.

The listeners sat silent, waiting expectantly for a return hoot. A minute went by, then two more. Still no answer came.

"I'd still say we had heard a real hooter if Mejicano hadn't laughed," Hal commented, his eyes shrewdly fixed on Antonio's now sober features.

"Listen again." Tony hooted once more. This time the call was low, long-drawn out and with a curiously weird quality about it. A breath of absolutely stillness, then an answer to the weird hooting came, and exactly in kind. He repeated the call twice. Each time it was answered. It had hardly died out the third time when Antonio sprang to his feet and called out something in Spanish. An answering sentence in Spanish brought the rest of the campers to their feet simultaneously.

"White Shadow!" yelled George. He made a joyful dive for a point farther up the Pass from where the sound had seemed to come.

"White Shadow, nothing!" Hal made an

alert dash for the same spot. He passed George at a gallop and headed straight into the deeper shadows of the Pass which the moonlight scarcely penetrated.

Next minute he was bouncing out of the shadows into the brighter rays of moonlight, jubilanting dragging beside himself a dark half-protesting figure.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TALE SHY BEAVER TOLD

“STOP wiggling, you big fake!” He was thus merrily addressing his catch. “You put it over on the rest of this mob of gay greenwood guys, but Mejicano was wise to you, and so was I. Tony had your number O.K. first hoot. I knew you, though, when you came back at Tony in Spanish. Just the same it was a dandy imitation of Emperor, old sport. You had the rest of the gang going.”

“Good, ugh?” inquired Shy Beaver, his leathery skin wrinkled in a wide, contented smile. The old chief was thoroughly enjoying being marched along toward the camp fire by Hal and George.

“Good? I’ll say it was great.” Behind the Indian’s back Hal had managed to attract George’s attention. He gave a quick, furtive nod toward the fire then touched his own lips with a light, cautioning finger.

“Betcha it was good.” George nodded his understanding of the motion over the Navajo’s

head while thus praising him. Then he began in a pretendedly stern tone: "See here, Misser Shy-off-and-lose-yourself, where have you been? Who told you you could drop out of camp without saying a word to your pals? Anyhow, you should have asked my permission. Boss Norton looks to *me* to see that the Long Trail Boys obey his orders."

"Ugh. Me old boy. No need boss like you."

"My, but you are sassy," George came back reprovingly.

"Now will you be good, Boss Davis?" Hal inquired delightedly. "That's fine, S. Beaver. Keep on handing it to him."

The night air was now ringing with a concerted burst of exclamation and remark from the other trailers who had gathered about Antonio and were clamoring for an explanation of what had been clear to him but obscure to them.

"How." Norton reached out to shake hands with Shy Beaver. Craig, wishing to surprise the Indian, ducked behind the guide and David.

"How," grunted the Navajo. Norton and David broke the solid front they had presented and Shy Beaver caught sight of Craig.

In a burst of glad surprise he let out a triumphant whoop, by far the noisiest sound the trailers had ever heard him make. He gave a kind of springy jump forward and wrapped both arms about the ranchman in a genuine bear hug.

Next moment he had released his delighted hold upon Craig to catch him by the hands and begin an energetic hand shaking. "Ugh, Pleasant Brave! You all right. Me worry *mucho* (much). 'Fraid you get hurt bad. Where White Shadow? Why you no with him? Something bad happen. Me see. Look this." He touched the long scar on Craig's cheek, then pointed significantly to the ranchman's unkempt appearance.

It was the first time any of the party had ever seen Shy Beaver stirred out of his usual stolidity. Combined anxiety regarding White Shadow's whereabouts and Craig's misfortunes revealed by the latter's ragged appearance had aroused him to an outward expression of anxiety.

"Gee whiz, but you are getting emotional, S. B.," Hal told the old man genially.

"You shut up. Me no getting nothin' you say. You cut out josh."

"Not another word, Harold. You may get

yourself in very bad with this great Navajo chief." Hal made an abashed gesture of self-reproof.

"Good words. You don't say many like that." With this thrust, delivered with Shy Beaver's own broad smile, the Indian turned his attention completely to Hartwell Craig.

Leaving them and Norton together, the boys hurried back to the patio and hustled together a midnight lunch of the same fare Craig had enjoyed, minus the pineapple, but plus a box of chocolate-coconut puffs which was one of Hal's knapsack treasures.

During the progress of Shy Beaver's meal the boys, who had resumed their places again about the camp fire, joshed him in their usual jovial fashion. Long training in the matter of Indian etiquette, however, kept them from asking him any personal questions about his absence. They knew he would explain it when he was ready, and not before then.

"You say you knew it was S. B. hooting the first time instead of Emperor. How did you know it?" David curiously asked Antonio. "Since you knew it wasn't Emperor hooting, what made you answer with his call?"

"I was quite positive in the beginning that

it was Shy Beaver calling instead of Emperor. To be sure, I gave the call of Emperor. I knew if it were Emperor, he would answer me. But if it were Shy Beaver he would not answer. Once, when Shy Beaver and I were hunting in Nevada he taught me how to give his own owl call. So I remembered tonight and tried it only for fun."

"Good call. I hear big white owl make sometimes. This owl me no see much for twenty years. Mebbe few left. *No sabe* (don't know)." Shy Beaver's bright dark eyes showed a glint of pride at his achievement.

Shy Beaver disposed of three chocolate-coconut puffs and tucked the box away in his knapsack for future consumption before he was ready to give an account of himself and his sudden disappearance.

"Me follow Galland," he began abruptly. Immediately attention centered itself upon him. "Galland take Comet. Me think he want ride for mebbe two, three days. Mebbe try find Pleasant Brave quick and bring you. *No sabe*." The Navajo's slight shrug as he advanced this theory meant it also contained room for doubt.

"No ride Comet fast. Bad trail, plenty

brush. Me walk. Keep up anyway. Come sun-up, Galland meet man. This man big tall man. Big shoulders; no fat. Him have black mask. Talk and talk Galland. Galland say 'No' many times, but talk good; no mad at him. This man have long black coat. Like coat el Halcon wear. He take little package, give Galland. It has the eat. No sabe what is. Galland eat. Then go for drink water little spring near. Quick's him go, this man jump on Comet. Ride away fast. Galland hear noise. Come run from spring. Him too late. Him swear. Then him run after Comet. Me go after him. Follow him three, four days. No see big man in mask more."

"Jiminy crickets! You picked a nice little bunch of adventures yourself, S. B." Hal gaily assured the Navajo. "You had your nerve to slide off and leave us, you rascal."

"I'm surprised to think he ever came back," Kent made sober assertion.

"Yes; isn't it a wonder?" George could not think of missing such an opportunity to tease Shy Beaver.

"What became of Galland?" Norton's tone bespoke his interest in the Texan's movements. What the Navajo had just

recounted made the Texan seem more of a puzzle than ever.

"Follow him four days, then him come his house. Ranch house, big, old. Him go in the house. Stay a while. Mebbe hunt for tall man with mask. When he come out he go stable and all over. Look and look. Me watch all night. Nobody but Galland there. Nobody come there. Late in night he come out. Look and look again. Pretty near find me. Him good woodsman."

"What would you take this big fellow to be, Shy Beaver?" asked Norton. "Masked fellows in the woods mean mischief, you know. From the way you've described him I'd judge him to be a rustler. Not because he grabbed Comet and vamosed with the pony. That deal lies between those two."

"The whole business gives Galland a black eye. I mean according to all outward appearances," Kent said flatly.

"That's precisely the point. You fellows all heard Galland's opinion of rustlers. He said he hated them worse than rattlers. Still, after saying that he slipped off with Comet and met a rustler, presumably in the woods. A fellow he was friendly enough with to accept food from."

"And who snaked-off his pony at the very first chance," finished George.

"*Verdad*. Still, all this proves nothing," Tony observed tranquilly. "I mean nothing bad against Señor Galland. The man in the mask may be the one friend he spoke of who made the secret trail." This had suddenly struck Antonio as an inspiration. "He may be a bandit," Tony's broad shoulders lifted themselves, "but not of Bolden's kind."

"You're as bright as a new tin pan, Meji-cano. You may be right, my boy. You may be right," Hal assured Tony in a tone of pompous approval. "Once he may have been a rustler. Now he only robs his friends."

"There may be more truth than nonsense in what Hal says," was Norton's speculative comment. "This masked fellow may be a reformed road agent who has it in for Bolden's gang and is trying to keep his identity a secret. He may have only borrowed the cayuse."

"He may be an old pal of Galland's." David advanced this explanation.

A diversity of opinions went the rounds regarding the Texan, his peculiar actions and his sudden disappearance from the camp with Comet. Like Norton, the Long Trail Boys

found themselves prejudiced in the courteous Texan's favor. They could not believe him to be either a bandit or in sympathy with these human wolves of the border.

Norton's question to the Navajo had been side-tracked by a burst of conjecture from the others. Shy Beaver had heard it, however, and was waiting his own time to answer it. When the babble of voices presently died down he said: "Little Father, you ask who is big man with mask. Me no think him bandit. Think him is loco. Mebbe Galland soon find him. Get Comet. Bring back cayuse. Mebbe this loco once good friend of Galland. Me take trail 'fore sun-up. No use watch Galland more. Come back quick."

"See anything of Bolden's gang of thieves in the woods?" Kent eagerly wanted to know.

"Yea-h, many. Me pretty smart. Go along; they no see me. Us go your house, Pleasant Brave. Safe there. Bad in woods just now. White Shadow come *pronto* (soon). Us wait your house for him an' him men." Shy Beaver had turned from Kent to address Craig in a manner too serious to be disregarded.

"My idea exactly, S. B." Craig returned

heartily. "If it has to be a case of fighting, I'd rather fight on my own territory. Besides, there's no sense in running needless risks. Eh, Norton?"

"We'll break camp at sun-up," was the guide's prompt reply. "Among the gang I guess we can fit you out with some better clothes than you're wearing. I'll give you one of my revolvers. Sorry there isn't an extra rifle. It's almost eleven now. What you need badly, Craig, is a few hours of sleep. As soon as it's light we'll fit you out with togs. I'll take the watch till three——"

"I will relieve you then," Tony cut in quickly, then laughed. "I beg your pardon, Señor Norton," he apologized. "I had to speak first, or lose the trick."

"Oh, you two sound sharps may go it. No one cares," Hal declared airily. "Here's where Hal gets a good night's rest. Wait till we walk in the front door of Craig's shanty. Look out for a grand celebration."

"It's a grand night—to—sl—ee—p," Kent yawned drowsily on the last word.

"Keep your face closed. A spread like that's catching," George informed him and then had to run for dear life.

Commendably soon the party of trailers

had rolled up in blankets for the night. Only Norton remained on the alert, pacing tirelessly up and down the hundred feet of camp space of which the patio was a part. He did not intend to be taken by surprise by a hostile prowler at either end of the natural court. He was more uneasy over the situation than he cared to say. It was the same old pressure of responsibility which took hold of him afresh each summer when the Long Trail outfit went adventuring.

As it neared the hour of two the guide ceased his patrolling of the camp limits and seated himself on the top of a moss-grown rock. Taking out his pipe, he filled it mechanically by the moon's white rays, lighted it by means of a tiny cigar lighter he carried and proceeded to enjoy a smoke. The stillness about him was such that he thought he might have heard a footstep at least an eighth of a mile distant.

The longer he sat and smoked the more intense the silence seemed to grow.

What was that? Norton sat erect with a quick, jerking movement which all but sent his pipe from his hand. A sound, distinct from other natural night sounds had fallen upon his acute ears. It was a peculiar sound

among a clump of close-leaved bushes at the upper part of the section of the Pass they were now in. It was not the gentle rustle of the wind among the low, leafy branches of the tall bushes. It was no louder, but it was a quick rustle, as though the bushes had been thrust lightly aside by a human hand.

The Nevada Hermit's eyes were trained exactly on the point whence the sound had come. He waited, ears strained for a repetition of the faint vibration. None came. Neither could he see any suspicious movement in the rank growth of green.

"That was more than the wind," he muttered, as he ran toward the tangle of vegetation. Flash light in one hand, his revolver in the other, he went noiselessly forward to investigate the ragged green thicket.

"Halt." Norton's voice, low and stern, broke upon the night. He had reached the edge of the little thicket in time to see a tall dark form rise all of a sudden from the ground and begin to run. "Halt. Who are you? I have you covered. Move, and I'll fire," he sent grimly across the canyon to the night prowler.

CHAPTER XIV

A NEW DANGER SIGNAL

THE dark form across the canyon halted. His revolver trained on the intruder, Norton moved resolutely upon his catch. It was easy to distinguish the lines of his form by moonlight. Only his face was in the shadow. The figure looked unusually tall. The guide wondered if the camp had received a visitation from Shy Beaver's "big man with mask."

"Who are— For Heaven's sake! You!" Norton shouted the "You" with a force and volume warranted to have aroused any sleeping outfit that might have chanced to hear it.

"Si, Señor Norton, it is I." Tony was laughing so heartily that he could hardly answer the guide's utterly disgusted ejaculation.

"Well, by jingo! Oh, ha, ha!" The ridiculousness of the situation routing his astonishment, the Nevada hermit broke into hearty laughter, too. "How the dickens do you happen to be awake and circulating?" he asked. "How did you manage to sneak into those bushes without my seeing you?"

"I was not in the bushes, Little Father." Antonio liked to call Norton by this name. "I was lying beside them. There I had crawled, snake-fashion, from where I had been sleeping. It was not I you heard. Both of us heard another sound. There was a man in the bushes, though I did not see him. I only heard him and saw the bushes move a little."

"Then we're still even," laughed Norton, "for my experience was the same as yours. I knew blamed well there was someone in those bushes. I might have caught him if I hadn't stopped a second too long to make sure of it. I thought I had him when you began to run, and I challenged you. Confound it," Norton exclaimed in vexation. "You might have caught the fellow if I hadn't held you up. I ought to be called the Nevada dumb-bell instead of the Nevada Hermit. Do you think you could have got him, Tony, if I hadn't butted in?"

"Hard to say, Little Father. Never before have I seen such quickness. This one in the bushes slipped along like a serpent. Perhaps it might have been the bad catch for me. It takes great agility and strength to go snake-fashion. I can crawl thus for a

a little way, but not so cleverly as this one went."

Norton's "You" had impressed itself sufficiently upon dreaming ears to cause a partial arousing of the sleepers. Hal had heard, to become instantly open-eyed and alert. Craig had also heard as a result of having formed a habit of sleeping very lightly during his recent captivity. While Tony and the guide were comparing notes Hal and Craig joined them, demanding to know what had happened.

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here," Hal hummed as David, Kent, and George came running toward them while Shy Beaver trailed stolidly along behind the runners, wrapped in his Navajo blanket.

Antonio had now left the group to whom Norton was giving an account of the stealthy intruder, and also of his own mistake. Flash light in hand, the Mexican was making an alert survey of the bushes among which the concealed prowler had been either crouching or lying. He had come to the upper end of the green growth, which dwindled into a ragged green fringe where the Pass opened again into a larger canyon. It was at this particular point that he had hoped to launch himself forward upon the skulker.

"*Ay mi madre!*" The Mexican's accent was one of quick surprise. He bent down and snatched something white, pinned like a banner to a limb of a bush. It needed but a glance to put Antonio in possession of its import. On both sides appeared familiar reddish-brown writing. He went racing back to the group he had lately left, his handsome features alive with excitement.

"Now I know who was here. See." He held up the strip of yellowish white muslin. "It is from the Unknown Messenger. Read it, Señor Norton." Antonio thrust the piece of muslin into Norton's hands. It was a trifle over half a yard in length and perhaps four inches in width.

Norton took the strip and turned it first one way, then another, while his companions played their flash lights upon it to aid in deciphering the message. They presently decided that it began with:

"Go from the Pass at once. You have been there too long and the wolves are on your track. There is one with you now who Bolden says must die by the snake. This one I have helped in his hour of need. Now I write to you in my own blood once more. Go away from here. Do not wait to fight Bolden.

I shall fight him alone and kill him when the time is ripe. But the time is not yet ripe. Bolden has more than a hundred rustlers to do his bidding. If you will go away by the trail you will find due west one mile from the Pass, and follow it west, you will be safe. It will bring you near to El Paso after a few days. Do not come back here until after I have killed Bolden. You will know when he is dead. If you do not go you will be caught in his net before I can rescue you or move on him. You will all die horribly. Beware of the snake den. Go, go, go. You will be attacked at the Pass before sundown tomorrow. Go while there is yet time. 'The Unknown Messenger.'"

"The Unknown Messenger is loco. No doubt about it." Norton looked up from the blood-written strip of muslin in his hands. "Just the same, there's probably truth in what he writes. I believe in him. There's no other way we can think of him after the help he gave you, Craig."

"My mind exactly. There is a genuine danger signal. I'm in favor of pulling up stakes at once and moving on. We'll stand a better chance of holding our own against fifty rustlers, or more, at my ranch house than

out here in the woods. Here we're likely to lose our ponies and be shot down in cold blood. I've yet to see any signs of mounted forest police, a sheriff, or even a constable." Craig spoke with the renewed snap which food, rest, and the joy of returning to his comrades had put into him.

"It's almost four now. Five minutes to four, I'll say," guessed Hal before consulting his aluminum-figured wrist watch. He liked to guess time, then verify it by his watch, proud of his ability. "Who wants to turn in again? Not this gang. Let's feed and beat it as Uno, the Loco Ink Slinger, advises."

"Hey, Craig, do you know the way to your own ranch?" George demanded jokingly.

"I have the diagram Emperor gave me," was the reassuring rejoinder. "I managed to keep it away from Bolden when he was giving me a once-over for valuables."

"Fine. Go to the head of the class and take this with you." From behind his own back George produced a soft bundle which he tossed buoyantly to Craig.

"Oh, no." The bundle unrolling itself in transit through the air Craig raised a vigorous protest as he saw that George had offered him his corduroy shooting jacket. "I'll not take

this from you, George. You need it yourself."

"You're on the wrong trail, Misser Craig. The bosses of this happy bunch come first. I've a sweater and a slicker, and I don't wear a coat much, anyway. Keep the change." George hurried off toward the horses before Craig could expostulate further.

The others surrounded the ranchman, each offering him some article of clothing, with the exception of Tony. He ran off after George but soon returned leading Hidalgo. He brought the pony to a standstill at the edge of the group about Craig. Hal, David, and Kent had made up among them the other articles of clothing necessary to rehabilitate their returned comrade. Even Shy Beaver contributed a pair of bran-new moccasins.

"You are to ride Hidalgo, Señor Craig," Antonio announced tranquilly.

"I'll be blamed if I will." Craig got ready for real refusal of any further favors from his pals.

"Pleasant Brave, you must let me do this." Antonio's persuasive reply contained a hint of concerned mastery. "You are still ready to tire easily from the bad time you have had. We cannot go fast out of the canyon. There

are too many bad bits of trail. I shall be able to keep up with the ponies walking. When we are out of the Pass, Hal, Kent, and I will take turns on Silverheels and Starlight. It will not take us long to go to your casa."

It took considerable pleading on Antonio's part before Hartwell Craig could bring himself to accept the sacrifices his comrades had more than willingly made for him. Finally he gave in, saying with a degree of appreciation, "I couldn't take your stuff, fellows, except that I know you want me to have it."

With the first dull gray of the fast lightening morning sky the Long Trail outfit had breakfasted on crackers, bacon, and coffee and were in the saddle again.

"We're bound to travel light, anyway," the guide informed Craig, not without anxiety as the two older men headed the pony-back procession up the canyon. "We are very low on supplies. Do you happen to know how far the nearest village is from your ranch? We must buy supplies, and before long."

"There was a hamlet called Spring Rock about five miles north of the ranch when I bought it years ago. It must be there yet, unless it has come to be a rustler's burg,"

Craig added as an after thought. "I've heard of honest ranchmen as having been crowded out of their own communities by such wolves. Now I remember that the man I bought the property of seemed anxious to sell it. He said ranching didn't agree with his health. I bought it as an oil prospect, but my affairs at Mariposa Ranch kept me from coming down here to develop it. I hope my ranch isn't being used as a rustler's roost. You see, I should have kept a line on my property down here, and I haven't. It's hard to say how long these rustlers have been encroaching upon it. They may have a headquarters in my ranch house."

"That's exactly what I'm going to find out," rejoined the guide. "After we're clear of this canyon the country is more or less open, and I dare say we'll be able to see the house from a distance. We can make a stop where there are trees enough for cover, then Shy Beaver and I will go scouting."

"That will be the best plan," concurred Craig. "You and Shy are the A-1 scouts of this expedition. I'm sorry I ever proposed this trip," he continued with bitter emphasis. "It's been a flivver, and a dangerous one. This raw, shoot-you-on-sight region gets my

goat. What's become of Gam? And Serapis?"

"We're going to stay here till we find that out, too." The guide's jaws set with determination.

"That's just the trouble," Craig protested ruefully. "You fellows are ready to stick to me in this killer's country, and it was I who got you into such a death trap. I'm to blame for the whole business. I knew that White Shadow didn't want me to try to make Francisco Pass alone. But I was bull-headed enough to try it, anyway. Now I'm here, and here I'll stay until I find Gam, or at least learn what's become of him. I mean to get Serapis back, too. Still, I know his life isn't in danger. Gam—what's one China boy's life to those cut throats? You know Gam is spunky when he get's started. He's likely to have come in for a quick finish. Besides," Craig lowered his voice, "I'd never get over it if one of the boys was shot down by Bolden's rustlers."

"Oh, come now," Norton said soothingly. "I understand the way you feel about the boys. So do I, for that matter. But they have been in too many gun scraps to be treated as youngsters. Gam is their pal, and not one of

them will stand for anything but to go on and find him. I know I'd not want David to back down now. George, Kent, and Tony are practically on their own. You know how game the Brents are about Hal."

"Good logic, and mighty comforting to as sore a man as I am over my own obstinacy," Craig made grateful reply. "I know one thing certain. Let me find Gam, and we'll leave this rustlers' burg, pronto. I'll put White Shadow's men on the trail of Serapis. They'll find him."

"I shan't be sorry myself to see the last of this territory," Norton commented with grim stress.

The trail out of the canyon proved very rough and wavering. It all but lost itself among the great rocks which the riders encountered more frequently in their way as they neared the end of the long Pass. At times there was hardly room for horse and rider to pass between huge up-standing rocks. They had the added misfortune, too, to stir up half a dozen or more rattlers which the woodsmen promptly shot.

"By Christmas! I begin to believe Uno, the red-ink-man, knew something about a den of snakes. Guess we've struck it!" exclaimed

Kent disgustedly as he watched the writhing of a dying six-foot rattler, thick as a man's wrist, which he had just dispatched. Kent had not yet come to the attitude of indifference which ranchmen exhibit toward the venomous reptiles.

"Might as well pot a few rabbits and have a stew," Norton said. It was growing toward noon and the riders were beginning to be hungry. "Half a dozen will be enough. We'll stop long enough to cook them. Supplies are down to almost nothing. Rabbits will taste good for a change."

During the morning journey they had seen plenty of rabbits. They never fired on the little animals for sport; only when they wished the rabbits for food. By scattering up and down the canyon, not far from where they had halted, the woodsmen soon had half a dozen. Tony and David bagged four of these and came back to the others with the news that they had shot the rabbits at the end of the Pass which lay not more than two hundred yards ahead at the bottom of a fairly steep drop.

The sounds of their guns had evidently not attracted undesirable attention to them. They had left the rock-strewn area behind

them, and were now finding the bottom of the canyon grass-grown and moderately level. Antonio and David had no sooner bagged their game than they set themselves to building a cookfire. Shy Beaver and Norton dressed and cut up the rabbits for cooking. George and Hal squabbled over who should be cook and ended by becoming partners. Kent busied himself with beating up the ground about their stopping place to insure safety from rattlers.

While their noonday meal threw out savory odors over the cookfire, the woodsmen left Antonio in charge of the stew cooking and rode their ponies to the point where the Pass ended in a drop. As they drew rein for a first curious survey of the country which they could see far and wide from the elevation, all eyes became focussed upon the faded red roof of a ranch house well to the east of them. It was built not unlike the Brents' home at Sweet Water Ranch, a resemblance which Hal noticed instantly and proclaimed. The house stood almost in the center of a wide meadow region, which was in itself a broad valley ringed about by wooded hills.

"There it stands! Lead us to it! 'Rah for Craig's house! Attaboy!" and similar jubi-

lant salutations greeted the sight of the old red-roofed house.

"It's farther away than it looks. Five miles, mebbe. Ugh. Si?" Kent appealed to the Navajo for confirmation.

"Good guess. Five mile. Mebbe little more."

"It looks good to me," was Norton's half grim commendation. "Let's go back now and get outside of that stew, then straight for Craig's place."

"Craig's folly, you mean," the ranchman said ironically.

"Don't throw rocks at yourself," George advised humorously. "You may have made a few mistakes, but we will all try to overlook——"

"*Hola! Ho—la! H-o-la!*" From the Pass the ringing shout was suddenly borne to the woodsmen's ears. It came in Antonio's strong, penetrating voice, echoing and reëchoing upon the stillness of the woodland.

CHAPTER XV

THE MAN IN THE MASK

MEANWHILE Antonio, with his usual desire to please his comrades, had willingly offered to watch the stew while the newly incorporated firm of cooks, "Georgie Fu and Harold Do," went gaily along with the others to the end of the Pass. With nothing to do but see that the water did not boil too low in the granite kettle of nearly cooked rabbit, the young Mexican had stretched himself at ease on a patch of soft grass. He lay bareheaded, with hands about his eyes, gazing up at the sunlight as it filtered through the network of countless green leaves.

Above the stillness of the wilderness he heard faintly the noisy salutations his comrades had accorded a sight of Craig's house. He smiled, then closed his eyes for an instant. Next second he had opened them again, conscious that someone was near. He was not sure that he had heard a step, but he had felt the unmistakable vibration of a human presence.

Before he could spring to his feet he felt a pair of strong but not ungentle hands cover

his eyes. Taken at a disadvantage, he tore fiercely at the blinding hands in a fury of resistance. So strenuous was his resistance that, in spite of the strongly gripping hands, one now grasping him by a shoulder, the other still covering his eyes, the Mexican boy managed to pull himself up to a sitting posture.

"Struggle not." A deep voice now addressed Antonio. "You are to come with me, my son. I thought you were dead. Come with me now and I will show you all the gold I have saved for you. I found gold, but no one ever knew it."

"Let me go, señor." I am not your son. You have made a mistake. I cannot go with you." Tony made an ineffectual struggle to get to his feet.

"Yes, you will go with me, ungrateful boy. Stand up. Let me look at you."

Antonio felt himself being jerked to his feet with a force and suddenness which all but took his breath. The hand left his eyes and was deftly whisked to his other shoulder. He found his eyes centered upon a black mask, from the eyeholes of which showed a pair of gleaming black eyes. High black leather boots, black riding clothes of a bygone period and a wide black sombrero completed the

attire of a man Antonio judged to be at least six feet three inches tall.

"Dare to deny me as your father," muttered the masked man angrily. "Come," he gave Antonio a pettish shake as though only mildly incensed with him. Involuntarily his hold relaxed slightly. He peered into Antonio's face as though trying to read his captive's thoughts.

Antonio took advantage of that brief degree of relaxation. Exerting all his strength, he tore himself free from the prisoning arms. Next instant he had sent his loud cry of "Hola, hola!" to his near-by comrades. "Stand where you are," he now ordered his late assailant. "Move and I'll fire." He stood ready to draw on the other.

The strange man in the mask half sprang toward him, uttering a kind of angry snarl. "I'll get you yet, my boy, and shut you up in your room for a week on bread and water," he threatened wrathfully. With one well-aimed shove of the foot he kicked over the kettle of stew, then with incredible quickness whirled and ran, unmindful of Antonio's revolver. It seemed but an eye wink to Antonio before he was out of sight, leaving the latter to right the kettle of stew, the

contents of which had partially escaped dumping.

"Your-s-s trul-l-y!" yelled Hal as he came racing down the Pass to Antonio. "What's stirring? Blamed if I can see anything stirring but the leaves." He glanced about him then at Antonio. "Seen an *espectro* (ghost) mebbe?"

"*Santos cielos* (great heavens)! I have seen something besides the leaves stir!" exclaimed Antonio, "I have seen the man in the mask."

"Whew!" Hal gave a surprised whistle.

"What's up?" cried George as the rest of the outfit arrived at a run.

"Mejicano just had a run-in with the fellow in the mask," Hal gave out the news with zest.

"Huh-h-h." Shy Beaver emitted a kind of interested grunt. "You see? What you think?" he asked Antonio.

"He is loco, Shy Beaver. Perhaps he was once the bandit. I was watching the stew when he came upon me from behind and tried to drag me away with him." Antonio proceeded to entertain his pals with the details of his recent encounter. "He must have had a son once, and though he is loco, he still has the memory." Tony thus concluded the

account of his adventure with the masked man.

Unconsciously he had imitated the deep tones of the seemingly demented man who had slipped up and taken him so entirely unawares. Listening to the imitation, light dawned upon Hartwell Craig.

"By gracious!" he exclaimed. "Your man in the mask is the Unknown Messenger. That would account for what Shy Beaver told us about the fellow taking Comet from Galland. He's crazy as a loon."

"He must be someone Galland knows well and thinks a good deal of," was Norton's opinion, uttered in a relieved tone. "I don't doubt but he's the man who fixed that secret trail. Clever as it is, it somehow suggests a nut. At any rate, that clears up anything we may not have liked about Galland's movements. Wish to goodness we could get hold of him. He may have had his own troubles trying to keep this lunatic in line."

"I am sorry this one who is loco got away before you came," Antonio said regretfully. "I shouted for you as soon as I was free, for I thought I could hold him with my revolver. When he bolted I found it not in my heart to fire at him, since he was loco."

"He's the Unknown Messenger. I'm pretty well positive of it," Craig repeated. "As such, he's surely been a friend to me, and to the outfit. He's a mystery, one that probably Galland alone can explain."

"It's a wonder he hasn't been popped over long ago by Bolden's gang," Hal said.

"They say a lunatic is safe to go anywhere," Kent commented.

"*Si hermano*," nodded Tony. "Bad men have always much superstition about one who is loco. They say it brings the worst luck to harm such a one. But I believe this man is very cunning. He watches these bandits often, but they seldom see him. Or, *quizas*, he pretends to know nothing, so they believe him foolish and not to be feared."

"He almost put the kibosh on the stew," grumbled George. "That came of not having me here to watch it. Gee, it certainly smells good." He gave a hungry little sniff.

Tony had quickly righted the kettle of stew. The pieces of meat which had rolled out on the ground he had washed in a bucket of water standing near and returned to the kettle. The stew was now ready to eat and the outfit gladly hustled into place about their oilcloth. Saltine crackers were the only addi-

tion to the menu. The meal was eaten in haste, due to Norton's desire to reach the ranch house fairly early in the afternoon. He wished ample time to go over the place before night.

In saddle again, the riders covered the few yards to the end of the Pass and essayed the rather steep drop to the meadow below it, glad to leave the rock-strewn, rattler-infested canyon behind them. Antonio clambered down the steep side ahead of the riders. He stopped at the bottom of the drop to wave an arm and call back in Spanish to the group of descending horsemen. Suddenly he gave a loud yell, wildly flourished both arms above his head and ran toward a bushy clump of small trees that edged the meadow.

Antonio's sudden shout acted electrically upon Hal. He sent Starlight down the declivity at reckless speed, his own mouth opened to its fullest extent in a series of encouraging yells. Led by him, the rest of the riders clattered down the steep to rein in on the edge of the meadow with neither Hal nor Antonio in sight.

Sound of excited voices nearby revealed them as not among the missing. A moment or two and Hal rode Starlight out from behind

the clump of trees that edged the meadow. He was smiling broadly as though signally pleased over something.

Antonio followed him, but not on foot. He had been on foot when he had shouted and then rushed off toward the thicket. Now he was mounted on a tall, brown pony that had a strangely familiar look.

An amazed, simultaneous cry of "Comet!" broke from the group of horsemen at sight of the brown cayuse.

"Si." Antonio was smiling broadly, too. "It is Comet. When I came to the bottom of the drop I heard the whinny of a pony. It seemed to come from behind those trees." He nodded back toward the thicket. "I looked and saw the head of Comet poked out from a sapling, eating leaves. Do you wonder I shouted? I was sure it was Comet. I thought the man in the mask had put him there, and was watching again for me. I thought I would try to hold him until you came so that you might see him and talk to him. It might be that he had seen Gam or knew something of him. But when I came to where Comet was, only the cayuse was there, and fastened to the saddle was this."

Antonio opened a closed hand, disclosing a

little fold of yellowish white muslin. Unfolded, it proved to be another banner similar to those that had already come to mean to them the sign of the Unknown Messenger. This one bore in the same reddish-brown writing three words only: "For my son."

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE OLD RANCH HOUSE

“**T**HE nut in the mask, alias My Own Red Ink, alias the Unknown Messenger, that everybody *now* knows, must have a crush on Mejicano,” was George’s waggish opinion.

“Since it has brought back Comet, I cannot complain,” laughed Antonio, “even if he did try to drag me off with him. He must have had the pony all the time since he took Comet from Galland.”

“I hope Galland is hunting him to get the cayuse back,” Hal declared. “In such case we’ll stand some chance of getting in touch with him again and finding out more about Tonum’s freak papa.”

A shout of laughter greeted Hal’s speech. Being young, there was something highly ridiculous to them in the masked lunatic’s claim upon Tony as a son. Tony grinned in sympathy with the outfit’s mirth. “Now I suppose you will kid me forevermore about being this poor man’s son,” he observed tolerantly.

"Oh, not that long. Only till we get something on somebody else in this happy band," Kent blithely assured him.

"To get down to serious business, I think it will be wise to hang around here until twilight," interposed Norton. "In the meantime Shy Beaver and I will go over to the ranch house and see how things are. We'll risk it pony-back," he added after a moment's reflection. "We can go and come more quickly. We'll start pronto, and be back by the first sign of dark."

"And what will we be doing in the meantime?" David demanded humorously.

"Nothing, and see that you do it without making a racket," was his uncle's retort. "Don't take a shot at any game, and don't any of you start off on an exploring tour of your own. The idea is to lie low until we come back. Except, of course, in case you are called upon to defend yourselves."

"In that case, men," Hal went on glibly without giving Norton a chance to continue, "shoot straight. Don't let anything get by you."

"Something like that. Only you're too blood-thirsty," Norton commented grimly. "We're woodsmen, not killers." In spite of

his cautionary reminder, the set of his strong features indicated trouble ahead for rustlers so far as he was concerned.

Soon afterward Shy Beaver rode off to the right and Norton to the left of the broad valley. The pair had planned to approach the house in a roundabout fashion, keeping as well as they could in the partial cover of trees, bushes, depressions in the ground, or whatever might serve as a screen to their progress.

It was after four o'clock when they met behind a small stucco outbuilding, the first of a number of similar shacks of stucco or wood which were scattered over a broad expanse of fields, well to the rear of the ranch house.

"Me find good place keep cayuses. We go see *casa*," was Shy Beaver's salutation as Norton finally brought Prince up beside Shy Beaver's pony. "Look." He held up a rusty key for Norton to see. Sliding from the saddle, he went over to the door of the little stucco house. He lifted a rusty chain and padlock for the guide's further inspection. "Find key in padlock. Me take. We put cayuses in here. No can get away. Nobody steal. Nobody have key, mebbe, fit this padlock. We come back, get cayuses a'right."

"Fine business." Norton dismounted and went over to the door which the Navajo was unlocking. The old chief loosened the chain, slipped the padlock and gave the door a hard jerk. It opened slowly, and with some creaking of hinges. The inside of the shack was empty of everything but a long table that extended across one end of it. A strong scent of tobacco lingered in the close atmosphere of the place.

"A tobacco drying house," Norton guessed as he caught the scent.

"Si. Not much air. Too bad for cayuses. But we don't keep here long." Shy Beaver at once led his pony into the shack. Norton followed him with Prince.

The Navajo calmly broke a rude setting of glass from two small windows high up on each side of the shack. Having done all he could toward the comfort of the ponies, he closed the door, locking it with evident satisfaction.

Very cautiously the two men began their advance toward the house. This time they kept together, opening the doors of the several shacks and outbuildings along their way. It was Norton's purpose to search every building on the premises before tackling the house. The majority of the buildings had unlocked

doors. Some of them stood open. The double doors of the stable were wide open, but the stable itself was empty. Over all hung the stillness which seems to be peculiar to a deserted house or estate. There were no signs that the bunk houses, of which there were three, had been recently occupied. There was no sign of animal life about save when an occasional rabbit, squirrel, or rat ran from them. Nor did even the sinister protest of a disturbed rattlesnake break upon their listening ears.

A close view of the house showed it to be less Spanish in architecture than Norton had thought it and more along Colonial lines. It was lacking in balconies and Spanish casements, and it had a wide, hospitable side porch and another at the back of the house.

"I'll bet there's no patio in this house," the guide said to Shy Beaver as the pair finally gained the back porch. "It makes me think of my grandmother's old house away up in Vermont. Looks to me as if we were the only ones stirring around here. Eh?"

"Si. Us here 'lone." The Indian was trying the back door of the house as he spoke. It was tall, stout, and of heavy oak. Moreover, it was securely locked. "No open that

door. Us better no try front door. Me open window."

With his hunting knife Shy Beaver began delicately as an experienced glazier on one of the small square-paned windows of the kitchen. Deftly removing it, he reached a capable hand inside, unlocked the window and raised the lower sash. Instantly he was over the sill with an: "Ugh. Somebody bolt door inside. No go out this way."

Norton followed the Indian in a hurry. Shy Beaver pointed to the door which was securely bolted, whether recently, or long ago they could not know. It was only partially light in the long hall into which they stepped from the farmhouse kitchen, an immense room with a huge bricked-in fireplace and deep wall cupboards. On each side of the hall were three spacious rooms, each opening into the other through wide archways. Each contained a fireplace and in two of them were furnishings; a high mahogany desk, a long library table with heavy claw feet and a massive hall rack of golden oak with a broad sheet of plate glass mirror, now too dust-covered to be of avail as a looking glass.

Shy Beaver made straight for the front door. It was not only bolted inside, but had a heavy

chain and padlock fastened across it. There were two other doors, one leading from what must have been a sitting room to the side porch, another they discovered in a small square hall opening into the yard on the other side from a tiny vestibule. It was the entrance to a secondary staircase between the kitchen and what must have been the dining room. Both of these doors the two men found locked by bolts on the inside. When they slipped the bolts to try the doors, however, they found the precaution of a double locking which someone, probably a former resident, had taken.

"Ugh. Doors lock in house. How fella get out and lock in, too?" Shy Beaver wanted to know.

"You tell." Norton made perplexed retort. "We may find some of the other windows unlocked. Think anyone's been here recently? You Indians seem to have a queer sense of knowing when a stranger's been around."

"Si." The Navajo and the guide were now standing in the middle of the large, square reception hall gazing speculatively about them. "Mebbe somebody here now." Shy Beaver's hand crept to his holster. "This no like place nobody come for long time. No much dust. See." He went to a window and

ran a hand over the sill, then held it up for Norton to see. It had collected no dust. "We look windows," he said. "Mebbe find unlock."

"All right. Let's look the house over while it's light. You take the left side windows of this floor and I'll do those on the right. After that we'll do the cellar and then the upstairs rooms."

The cellar door was one of four that opened into the big kitchen. The two men went cautiously down the stout wooden flight of stairs to find a spacious, well-cemented cellar partially filled with old furniture, garden implements, and empty casks and boxes. They each took a side of the excavation and searched it.

"Not a soul down here," Norton presently called out to the Indian.

"No see nobody now." Norton saw that Shy Beaver was not satisfied. Doubt shaded his reply. "Mebbe 'nuther cellar under this one," the old chief suggested.

"Have you seen anything to back up that guess?" Norton shot a quick glance at the Indian.

"Naw. No see nuthin'. Too much junk." Shy Beaver indicated the array of junk

scattered about the cellar with disfavor. "Move tomorrow. Boys help. Mebbe find trap in floor."

"Yes; tomorrow will have to do. It's too late today to overhaul things here. We've the rest of the house to go over, and must get back to the outfit before dark."

The two men returned to the ground floor of the old house, they ascended the walnut staircase, with its railed-in balcony, to the second floor. The second floor rooms were bare of furniture with the exception of one large front room. It still contained a huge four-poster bed, two or three carved walnut chairs with leather seats and high backs, and an old oak chest.

They made a keen search of the big empty rooms, peering sharply into closets and prodding the walls and wainscoting with exploring fingers to discover if there were any secret passages or recesses in the house. Norton thought there might be hidden compartments or the beginnings of secret passages behind the high-paneled wainscoting. He judged the house to be nearly a hundred years old and built along Colonial lines.

They found an attic half filled with old-style, dust-covered furniture. It looked as though

most of the furnishings of the down stairs rooms has been consigned to the attic.

"Plenty dust here." Shy Beaver said, his black eyes roving alertly over the big room.

"Looks as if we might be the first fellows up here since the last owner of this place before Craig left here," Norton agreed.

They did not linger in the attic; simply gave it a keen once over and returned to the first floor of the house. They let themselves out of the house by the window through which they had come in. Norton fastened the door again from the inside and after they were through the window Shy Beaver carefully set the pane of glass he had removed in place again.

The sun had dropped low in the sky when they turned their ponies' heads toward the point where they had left the rest of the outfit waiting. They had not proceeded far across the broad valley when from behind a growth of straggling bushes they caught sight of a black moving mass. Soon it was clear of the bushes and moved slowly in their direction, swaying and undulating from side to side in the long coarse meadow grass.

"Ugh." Shy Beaver pointed. "*Javelina*. Bad medicine. They no see us. Good. We

go way round." He described a wide circle. "Look like pig, but no pig. *Malo, malo* (bad, bad)."

"Yes, I know the blamed critters. They're peccary, and fighters."

Norton was already turning Prince from the route they had been following. "I saw a herd of them tear a horse to pieces once. They were after a bull who'd started chasing them when they were rolling along minding their own affairs. The horse happened to be between them and the bull. They charged it from all sides. It was dead inside of five minutes. I sent a couple of shots at the horse and hope they helped him out. But I never want to see anything more cruel than those tusked, fiery-eyed fiends."

"Si. Bad medicine. Me see javelina kill horse an' man once. Me all 'lone. Shoot rifle plenty. Kill some, but too late."

They had been headed straight for the oncoming herd of peccary, but had now made a wide enough detour to escape the savage animals' path.

"Hold up a minute, S. B. I want to get a good look at those beasts."

Norton dived into his knapsack for his binoculars. The powerful glasses trained on

the swaying, moving mass of animals showed them to be smaller than the ordinary wild pig. They were high-shouldered, with black bristling hair, tusked and red-eyed.

Add a pair of knifelike tusks to a general disposition to fight and the peccary even in small numbers become a formidable enemy if interfered with ever so little. Both male and female are tusked and fighters. "To the death" is their war snort, and they are possessed of wonderful agility as well as ferocity.

"What those rippers need is shells from a big shot gun," Norton said grimly as he offered the glasses to Shy Beaver. "Bolden and his gang might do better to hunt down such pests rather than run in a pack like 'em."

Shy Beaver waved away the glasses. "Naw; see plenty good. Spirit my grandfather no like." With Norton he dared be himself superstitiously.

"Beg your grandfather's pardon," Norton's face stayed solemn. Only his gray eyes laughed.

The Navajo shot a sidelong look at his companion, half grin, half serious. "White Shadow come, pronto." He made quick change of subject. "Then hunt javelina; kill all. Chase Bolden first."

"Yes, by crackey, we will," was the guide's determined rejoinder.

Fortunately for the pair, the peccary went strictly on about their own business. They kept on traveling obliquely across the meadow toward a more dense growth of bushy thickets which edged the lower slope of the ring of wooded hills.

"We'll have to watch out for those knifers this evening. I'd hate to ride into that bunch once it had settled down for the night. I don't want to make a start for the house in bright daylight, but it mustn't be dark, either."

"Mebbe not be here more," the Indian reassured. "Mebbe javelina come from far, go 'way. No come back."

"Hope they don't. We've a wolf pack to down. That's enough."

Returning to camp, the guide found the rest of the outfit excited over the herd of peccary. From their high elevation they had been able partially to follow Norton and Shy Beaver's progress across the meadow. The herd of peccary they had seen quite plainly. Antonio had instantly recognized the tusked herd as the dread javelina which kills not for food or in self-protection; instead, from sheer bad temper.

"Oh, Gee! I'd like to try a round with' a bunch of those stabbers. A bull fight would have nothing on a run-in with the javveys," Hal declared longingly. "Betcha Starlight could outrun 'em any time."

"Huh. I wouldn't risk Silver," Kent said prudently.

"Good old sport. I like the way you take care of my cayuse. I'd risk either of 'em, though, if I carried a shot gun that was a wiz at handing out cold lead."

"How about Hidalgo, Tonums?" Hal turned to Tony.

"*Nunca* (never). It is one thing to shoot javelina from a safe place. It is another to have them tearing along after your cayuse."

In spite of their interest in the appearance of the herd of peccary, the Long Trailers' first question had been concerning Gam Fu, their missing cook and friend. All had hoped that perhaps Gam might have found the ranch house and taken refuge there. It was a forlorn hope, but they had seen strange things come to pass since their first trip as the Long Trail Boys through the Nevada wilds.

"S. B. says there has been somebody in the house recently," Norton informed the outfit

at supper. It consisted of coffee, what was left of the stewed rabbit, graham crackers, and a little bacon.

"Mebbe Gam?" Hal put eagerly to the Navajo, who was stoically piling sugar into his coffee cup.

"No sabe." The Navajo shook his head undecidedly. "Somebody go there. Si, somebody go there. Mebbe Bolden, mebbe loco messenger, mebbe Gam. Anyhow we go there tonight. It is time. Find out who, pronto. It no Gam, then must find."

"Unless poor Gam——" George's pause was eloquent of his feelings.

"Naw. Gam no dead. Gam smart boy. Me think mebbe lost in woods. No dead. *Nunca.*"

CHAPTER XVII

THE GREAT UNEXPECTED

THE start for Craig's house was made that evening as soon as the late twilight had wrapped in purple shadow the partially open territory which the outfit would have to travel on their way to the ranch house. For a part of the way wooded fields and frequent leafy thickets would help to obscure their progress. There was, however, a long stretch of open sloping meadowland which dipped gradually down to the broad valley below which would have to be traversed by the riders in order to reach the ranch house.

Norton, very sure of his route, headed the van. Shy Beaver trailed along in the rear, his shrewd black eyes missing nothing. The guide had urged Prince into a gallop and the other ponies were keeping up with him, glad of a chance to run.

"We'd better speed up on this trip," Norton had advocated. "If any of Bolden's gang are hanging around watching us they'll see less of us going it at a fast clip than if we were trying to slip along without being seen. It's

not easy for a bunch like ours to keep to cover when on the move."

Descending the long, irregular slope to the valley bottom, the riders spread out, keeping a distance of several feet between each horse. They drew rein at last in the shadow of the old brick stable situated not far behind the house. Norton had closed and barred the stable doors on his first precautionary visit to the ranch in company with Shy Beaver. To all appearances it stood exactly as he had left it.

The guide was off Prince in a minute and examining the stable door. Next he pulled back the bolt, sweeping the dark, silent cavern within with his flash light. He disappeared inside with, "Stay where you are. I'll only be a minute." Immediately he reappeared, confidently declaring that he believed no one had been in the stable since he and Shy Beaver had left it.

"We'd best go on up to the house," he said. "We can't keep the ponies in the stable. We'll have to tie them in the back yard near the house and post a guard. Sorry the ranch house hasn't a patio. I'd say stall the ponies in it overnight. You fellows can see the inside of the stable tomorrow."

Rebolting the heavy stable door, Norton remounted Prince and led the advance upon the ranch house. It was dark now; a dense darkness which would not be lifted until the moon rose.

Antonio and Shy Beaver had volunteered for guard duty that night. Shy Beaver took the first turn, remaining in the yard behind the house with the ponies. The others trooped into the ranch house by way of the back door. Shy Beaver had again entered the kitchen by the window route and unlocked the back door.

"Wish we had even a lantern," Hal grumbled during the flash light tour, they made on the ground floor of the house. "Seeing Craig's castle by flash gets my goat."

"I kept my eyes open for an oil lamp, or even candles, when we went through here this afternoon. Nothing doing," was Norton's rejoinder.

"Dished in the dark for tonight," put in George in pretended desperation.

"A good dishing, I'll say," Craig asserted. "I'd choose being under cover with Bolden's pack in the offing rather than the woods."

"It's our best headquarters till we've doped out our hunt for Gam." Norton's words

vibrated with concern for the missing China boy.

"I'll beat up every foot of land in this robbers' country till I find him, or what's become of him—and Serapis." Craig was afire with stern determination.

Since they had eaten their meager supper before leaving the Pass, there was nothing further to be done that evening except explore the upper floors of the house by flash light. The outfit presently settled themselves in the spacious rectangular sitting room, which still contained a long leather-covered couch and several deep-seated easy chairs upholstered in faded tapestry. With the large camp flash light set in the middle of the yellowed white marble mantelpiece they could see the room and one another fairly well.

Hal, Kent, and David took immediate and hilarious possession of the couch and engaged in a concerted attempt to keep George off it. Antonio began a catlike prowl about the sides of the room in an absorbed search for possible secret panels concealed in the high wainscoting. The play of his pocket light up and down the paneling cast weird shadows about the big room.

Craig and Norton had seated themselves in

easy chairs to smoke their pipes and "dope out" the outfit's future movements.

"We're worse than low on supplies, you know," the guide said gloomily. "There's some coffee left, a few boxes of cakes and graham crackers and not more than a pound of bacon. We've no flour, sugar, or canned goods. We'll have to fall back on game till we can strike some kind of supply place. The trouble is we're too few in number to split up into two parties. If one half the crowd could stay here and hold the fort, I daresay the other half could ride out and find a store, or an excuse for one. But we can't. We've got to stick together."

"Tony is crazy to go on a one-man trip for supplies. He says he could get away with it." A brief smile touched the ranchman's lips. He shook his head. "I'd not let him risk it. Not after what happened to me. Tony is as dear to the Brents as a son."

"I'd not care to see David go on such a trip." Norton glanced toward his nephew with concerned affection. "Or any of the others, for that matter. It's shoulder to shoulder for us while we're in this bad man's territory. Sh-h-h!" He sent a sudden sibilant warning to the jovial squabblers on the couch. "You're too noisy."

"Yes-ee. That's what I say. Put on the brake." Having been vanquished by his three grinning antagonists, George now took sides with Norton. "I can't see you rough-necks for a minute. Here's where I help Mejicano hunt secret holes in the wall."

"It seems there are none. Or else I am *muy estupido*. I cannot find any." Antonio straightened from a stooping posture with a shrug.

"Oh, let me at it." George made a playful rush toward where Antonio stood, flash light in one hand, the other busy with the paneled wainscoting. His investigating fingers traveled up and down the narrow grooves between panels in the hope of releasing a secret mechanism that would operate a sliding panel.

"Here goes! Whiz! Bang! Rippity-zip! Open up!" George swooped down upon the wainscoting, pressing the fingers of both hands upon a panel groove in an exaggerated imitation of Antonio.

"*Santos cielos!*" Antonio sent up an amazed shout. There had come a slight grating sound as one of the wainscoting panels slid back and vanished into the panel next to it on the right.

"What did I tell you?" George was waving a triumphant arm toward the recess now disclosed by the vanished panel. It was the height of the wainscoting, about four feet, and the width of one panel, about two feet.

"Lovely mackerel! Some fellows have plain luck!" Hal exclaimed.

"Luck, nothing. I had the right dope, because I'm naturally bright at getting wise to things," was George's pompous retort.

A general groan greeted this defense. The party were now grouped about Antonio, flash lights trained upon the hidden wall cupboard thus suddenly revealed. It was not empty. At the back of the recess, which was at least two feet in depth, lay a small, squarely-folded black package.

"Here is something." Antonio was now holding up the black package. "See, it is of velvet. *Ay mi madre!* I know what it is." Pocketing his light, he hastily unfolded the black square. "It is as I thought."

"Masks!" ascended in a surprised chorus.

"Yes, by clam! The kind of face hidiers el Halcon sported," cried Kent.

"El Halcon may have left them here," David said, "Maybe he once hung around this part of the map when things got too hot

for him in Mexico. He might have roosted here at times even after Uncle Hartwell bought the ranch. Maybe he and Bolden understood each other and each let the other's gang alone."

"More likely they were bitter enemies," the guide disagreed. "That is, if they knew each other at all. Queer about these masks." He took one of them from Antonio, examining it minutely. Then he held it up to Hal's merry face.

Hal took it and adjusted it to his youthful features. "Up with your hands!" he commanded in a tone startlingly like that used by the notorious Mexican bandit. "It fits like a glove," he added in his own voice.

"A sure enough old Hawk-nose fit," David commented and the others agreed with him.

The story of el Halcon and his capture by White Shadow and the Long Trail Boys has been set down in "The Long Trail Boys and the Scarlet Sign."

"Some robber has cached these masks. How long ago? That's a question. They may be Bolden's." Norton scrutinized them darkly.

"Wish he'd come around alone after 'em." George went through a spirited pantomime of

first shooting, then scalping the outlaw, using David in lieu of Bolden.

"I'd enjoy getting hold of him long enough to make him tell us where Gam is. It's hard to decide which way to look for the boy," Craig ended with an audible sigh.

"We'll start the hunt due north at sun-up, trail all day and come back to the house at night; and so on every day. We'll consider the house as the center of a circle and radiate in all directions from that center. In that way we can't fail to strike a supply depot or store, too."

"Hooray!" Hal could not resist an enthusiastic cheer. Forgetting caution, the other boys joined in the yelling. "'Scuse me, Boss Norton." He laughingly ducked his head as the guide admonished him with an emphatic "Sh-h-h! That yip'll travel clear across the valley."

"Positively the last whoop I have in stock," Hal promised with merry contrition. "Nothing but a startler will stir me up again tonight."

"Ay, but that is the good news," Antonio said slyly.

"Don't bank too hard on it. I may change my mind," Hal retorted.

The boys continued to joke among themselves. Gradually silence fell upon the group. The strenuous events of the past two weeks combined with lack of sleep had left the young woodsmen more tired than they thought. The comfort of indoor shelter and padded chairs had gradually brought about a reaction.

"What was that?" Norton's relaxed movement tightened into new vigilance. He sat bolt upright in his chair, listening intently.

The intensified hush that hung over the group was due not to Norton's question. All had heard an unmistakable rattling sound, proceeding apparently, from the part of the cellar directly under the sitting room. With the silence above it ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

For several minutes the Long Trailers preserved an unbroken hush. Antonio shattered it with a whispered, "I hear footsteps on the cement floor."

"Someone's down cellar. That's a cinch," echoed George under his breath.

"And don't seem to care who knows it, either," Kent added.

"Hark!" Up went Craig's hand.

They could now hear the footsteps dis-

tinctly. An instant more and they heard them on the cellar stairs.

"Is the cellar door into the kitchen bolted?" Hal was almost to the door as he asked the question.

"No, by gracious. I was last up from the cellar. I'm afraid I didn't bolt it."

Craig started for the sitting room door. Hal had already disappeared cellarward. The others dashed down the wide hall and through the kitchen after them. They were just in time to see the cellar door pop open and a figure hurl itself straight upon Hal.

"For Pete's sake! Oh, wow-wow-wow! Can you beat it?" Hal and the mysterious occupant of the cellar were locked in a wildly swaying embrace. In time with Hal's flow of amazed outburst a familiar voice was interpolating high-pitched squeals of joy. Gam Fu had done precisely what might have been expected. He had appeared at the most unexpected time and in the most unexpected manner.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE UNKNOWN MESSENGER

“**T**AKE my arm, my 'esteemed fren', Mr. Fu, and let me lead you into the council room. Here we've been planning a hunt for you while you've been sitting tight in the cellar. Why didn't you come up and be recognized? Or are you a bold and bloody robber now?” Hal had already begun to steer the joyful China boy toward the sitting room. The others trailed along behind the pair, deluging the strangely returned cook with buoyant sallies. They had just put him through a handshaking which testified their gladness at his return.

“No-ee.” Gam added the “ee” in squealed protest. “Me don't lookee like lobber. Looke velly poor China boy.” He indicated his high-laced leather boots now almost in tatters, his dilapidated corduroy trousers and ragged flannel shirt. He had neither coat nor cap and the former roundness of his face had been replaced by a gaunt, hungry look. “Lobbers takee my gun, kniffee; evlything. Me getee 'way, but have nossin'. Bad

tlimee. Nossin' to eat in woods onlee blerries. Stealee li'l corn, li'l potatee. No fire; must eatee raw. No likee 'tallee. Len comee here. Nicee place."

"What do you know about this house, Gam? How long have you been here?" were Norton's energetic questions as soon as the China boy was in one of the easy chairs in the sitting room.

Craig had already been plying Gam with questions relative to his escape on the day when they two had been attacked by the bandits. Gam, it developed, had been run off by half a dozen rustlers to a hut on the edge of a small clearing. He had been searched, stripped of rifle, wrist watch, revolver, holster, cap, coat, knapsack, and a little roll of bills he had carried in a bag round his neck. That night a drunken Mexican had come to the hut with a small loaf of bread and a pitcher of water. The next day Gam had seen no one. He had made good use of the daylight, however, and before dark had located a weak spot in the timber of the hut. Using a heavy pine table leg which he had found in the hut, laid close to the wall to keep out the air, he had managed to batter out two boards of the shack next to the ground.

The hut was built in a ramshackle manner with the most primitive kind of excavation in the way of a cellar. It was nearly dark on the second day after his imprisonment before the intrepid China boy had succeeded in making the opening large enough to crawl through. He had wriggled through the narrow space at dark. He had had nothing to place in front of the opening while in the hut to conceal it. He had realized sharply the danger of delay.

"Oh, Misser Norton." Gam beamed contentedly at the guide, then around the circle of listening comrades. "Me know lottee 'bout this house. Me findee long timee 'go. Mlebbe thlee weeks; mlebbe more. Me shutee up in shackee two days. Then me go five days in woods; findee nossin' to eat. Then comee here. Me findee plentlee."

"Plenty?" rose in a concerted hopeful howl.

"Leave it to Misser Fu to track down anything in the eats line." Hal waved a cheerful hand about his head. Sight of Gam's bland familiar features and innocent air had lifted a load of depression from his heart. Hal's affection for the China boy was very staunch.

"Yes-ee." Gam elevated knowing brows. "Plentlee eats in cellar. Me takee care.

You go down cellar you can't see; can't see eats; can't see me when me there." He chuckled, a mysterious high-keyed chuckle.

"Come across," urged Kent coaxingly. "You seem to know a lottee that we don't. Blamed if we saw anything in the cellar that looked like an eat."

"Walkee down cellar you can't see nossin'. Me findee 'nother cellar way down un'er," Gam made triumphant revelation.

"Just as Shy Beaver thought!" the guide exclaimed. "He had an idea there was another cellar below the first. He sensed another person's presence there. He intends to go over the cellar in the morning."

"I will go out and watch the ponies so he can come in." Antonio volunteered with his usual thoughtfulness toward others. He went out to the back yard to tell the Navajo the good news and spell him on guard duty.

"Ugh. Me sabe Gam no dead," grunted the Navajo after hearing Tony's joyfully-told news. Nevertheless a slow smile of satisfaction dawned on the leathery old face of the chief. He was fond of Gam in his queer, stoical way.

"What you have eatee tonight?" was one of Gam's first questions when the glad rush of greeting had subsided.

"Blamed little, Misser Fu. We're down to a cracker apiece and a drink of water," Hal announced ruefully.

"You come helpee me. I show plentlee eats." Gam waved an encouraging arm in the direction of the cellar.

His invitation was accepted, not alone by Hal. An acclaiming cheer went up from the others. The outfit, including the Navajo, who had entered the living room in time to hear Gam's invitation, rushed pell-mell toward the cellar door.

The trap in the floor was a three-foot square block of cement of the same sort of composition as the remainder of the cellar floor. Directly over it stood an old-fashioned dressing case. The China boy pushed the dressing case out of the way with a, "Lookee." A battery of flash lights were turned upon the point of the cellar floor which the big case had covered. They revealed to alert, searching eyes no trace of an outlined square in the cement. It was there, however, and fitted into place so perfectly as to defy detection—almost. Gam Fu had shown the wisdom of the Orient when it came to underground cellars. Canny investigation had inspired him to believe there was one below the main

cellar. Fear of a visit from Bolden and his rustlers in his new stronghold had urged the China boy on in his desperate search for it.

"But how in Pete's name did you vanish by the Aladdin limited and manage to pull that big dresser over the vanishing hole at the same time?" David was eying Gam with a mixture of puzzlement and admiration.

"I believe you did it, you grinning Chinese wonder. But how, how, how?" was Hal's laughing question.

"Lookee." Gam took a small putty knife from a trousers pocket. All eyes were bent on him in fascination as he stooped and placed the blunt steel blade of the knife directly upon a certain part of the thin square he had first traced upon the cement for his friends. He bore suddenly down upon the place with the knife. His hand came up instantly and the trap with it, revealing a square dark gap in the floor.

Gam dropped lightly into the gap. He held himself up by clinging to an edge of the opening, his face mischievous with smiles. "Nicee place," he declared with an approving downward nod. "Velly dly. No micees. No snakees. No even one lat."

"Great! Gul-lorious!" Hal ejaculated in

pretended wonder. "Give us some more of your Aladdin act."

Gam's smiles grew broader. Hanging to an edge of the trap with one hand, he reached up with the other and fastened his fingers tightly around a leg of the dresser. Then he let the composition cover drop slowly down on his head while he continued to pull the dresser toward him. Came a curious, hollow-sounding noise. The cover was in place and the dresser stood over it.

A shout broke from the laughing group as the composition trap began slowly to rise and a yellow brown hand appeared in view. One vigorous shove of Gam's right arm sent the dresser sliding a foot or two. Next second Gam was out of the trap and the center of enthusiastic attention.

"Some husky guy, aren't you?" was George's appreciation of Gam's Aladdin stunt.

"I'll say he is," Kent whacked Gam forcefully on the back. "It takes brawn to work traps and move furniture at the same time."

"And the furniture is heavy as lead!" Suppressed laughter lurked in David's sympathetic comment.

"He, he! You velly smhart to know, Misser David," giggled Gam. "Lookee."

He pulled the handles of the lowest drawer of the dressing case. The supposed drawer tumbled out upon the cellar floor. It had been sawed off inside until only enough of it remained to keep up the appearance of a drawer. The other two drawers had met with the same fate.

"Fixee nicee inside. Me keepee clase over tlap. Me putee tlap up, too, inslide dlessing clase. No bodee think there is 'nother cellar. No bodee think I am in this cellar." Gam looked signally pleased with himself. "Me workee velly hard. Take allee eats down." He pointed a significant finger floorward. "One day me here, comee sombodee. Walkee, walkee up stairs rooms long time. Walkee slow; walkee like this." Gam stamped about heavily on the cement floor. "Me no flaid. Thinkee better hidee, 'cause is Bolden or lobbbers. After while, go away. No comee down cellar."

"Has Bolden ever been here since you came?" Craig asked quickly.

"Yesee. Comee one, two, three times." Gam enumerated on his fingers. "First time comee here with five mannies. Me lookkee out window. See away off. Me just comee here then. 'Flaid Bolden catchee me, killee me.

Me go down cellar. Hidee long while. Bolden lookee this cellar. Talkee velly loud. Me hear him say me Chinese fool. He findee me, killee me. Me deadee, tellee no tlaes. Second time comee allee 'lone. Don't comee down cellar. Comee 'nother day with some his lobbers. Hunttee eats. Bolden velly mad. Comee down cellar. Talkee loud. Say he buy plentee eats, put here. Now gone. Where go? Somebodee comee here. Stealee eats. He catchee, killee. Me think it bad placee for me. Gettee out qulick. But where go?"

"And all the time we were worrying about getting out of that confounded Pass so that we could start the right sort of hunt for you," interposed George. "I've tried to take your place as cook, Misser Fu. I've cooked more than I've killed, and that's some record."

"Some day you cookee li'l for me, Misser George. Me likee see something you cookee."

"I'll boil you some water, and boil it in A-1 style," was George's ready offer.

"You do it rightee way, Misser George. Me cookee now. You bloys please helpee me blingee up the eats. You hunglee? Me feedee glang."

"Sh-h-h-h!" Norton's precautionary warn-

ing summarily hushed the rising tide of joyful yells. "Put on the brake."

"It's on." Hal paused in the middle of a lusty yell and shut his wide-open mouth with a snap.

Gam went down into the under cellar with alacrity. During his self-imposed captivity he had taken inventory of the furnishings of the old house and had removed to the cellar whatever he fancied as necessary to his welfare. He had discovered a large lantern and a five-gallon oil can partly filled with oil. These furnished him with light in the under cellar which he soon turned into a store house as well as a hiding place.

He had been surprised to the point of executing a wild dance of rejoicing when he had discovered the large stock of food supplies on hand. There was flour, sugar, bacon, coffee, lard, and butter, besides plenty of canned vegetables, fruit, salmon and evaporated milk. He had found the "eats" before he had found a safe place to cache them. Finally he had, after true Chinese perseverance, discovered the second cellar.

It had taken him the better part of two days to move the supplies to his secret nest. During the moving he had kept a worried lookout

for intruders. He had been afraid that Bolden might have picked up his trail to the ranch house.

All this and more he related to his comrades as they lugged the supper supplies up the stairs and proceeded to turn to and help Gam cook supper. It was after eleven o'clock when they sat down to hot, flaky biscuits, a huge platter of bacon and another of salmon, creamed peas and canned pineapple with coffee, accompanied by cream and sugar.

It was not far from one when they returned from the dining to the living-room to roll up in their blankets on the living room floor. Shy Beaver had elected to stand guard until sun-up, waving away all offers from the rest of the outfit to relieve him.

At three o'clock Hal suddenly awakened from a light sleep. His eyes opening in the dark, he saw nothing for a moment. Then he made out a figure standing near a window.

In the same instant he heard Norton's voice ask softly, "That you, Tony?"

"Si," came reassuringly from Tony. "It was I, rising, you heard."

"What's stirring?" Norton had sprung noiselessly to his feet and hurried to the window where Antonio was standing. Hal was also on his feet.

"The ponies have heard something they do not like the sound of, Little Father. Hidalgo has whinnied twice and Silver has been stamping his feet. Someone——"

"Ugh." A dark form came bounding across the threshold, moccasined feet making no sound. "Somebody come. Mebbe White Shadow and men. Mebbe rustlers. No put cayuses in stable. No leave cayuses outside. Bring in house. Hurry."

Without waiting to hear a reply, the Navajo disappeared into the darkness of the long hall and raced toward the back yard.

"You and Hal go and help S. B. with the ponies." Norton told Antonio. "Stand just outside the back door with your flash light turned on the doorway and into the kitchen. We'll put the cayuses in there for tonight. Glad the outside shutters are all barred. Did you close the ones again you were looking out of, Tony?" The guide had become the intrepid man of action. "Run the cayuses to the door and we'll take them from you there."

"Si, Little Father." Antonio dashed from the room.

"Listen," grunted Shy Beaver to him as, a few minutes later, he reached the spot where the ponies had been tethered.

Antonio stopped, his ears alertly trained to catch the sound the Navajo had heard.

"Someone rides alone, and in a hurry," was the Mexican's surmise.

"Si. Come here," the old chief added.

Even as he mumbled the words they felt the vibration of, rather than heard, the sound of a horse's galloping feet.

CHAPTER XVIX

AT GUARDIAN ROCK

NEARER and nearer drew the unknown rider. Now he and the horse he rode formed a deeper blot in the darkness by which their outlines might be distinguished faintly from the night. Two flashlights were trained low upon the horseback figure as the rider came up with the two lookouts.

"*Santos cielos!*" Tony vented his favorite exclamation. He had seen in the brief moment his light had outlined the newcomer what reminded him strongly of a carnival mask. The face of the night rider was like nothing human that he had ever seen. It was a black, white, and red painted horror. He recalled in a flash Gam's description of the Chinese demon he had seen in the woods and understood now what it all meant.

"I have come to tell you. You must try to save him," Antonio had good reason to remember the deep, resonant voice that issued from behind the grotesquely horrible mask. He was again listening to the demented man of the woods who had claimed him as a son.

"He will die by the snake at daylight if you do not help him. He was your friend. He showed you my secret trail. It made me very angry with him. But I do not care now." The demon-faced man made an indifferent, sweeping gesture. "There are nine of you, and I shall make one more. We must go to the rock and shoot to kill. They will try to give him to the snakes, but we shall kill them all. It will be glorious. And I am he who has made this great plan. I am the Unknown Messenger."

"Señor, will you come into the house with me?" Tony asked coaxingly. "We are more secret there. Bring your horse with you. You know we are your friends and the friends of Señor Galland. We will save him."

For answer the demon face leaned near Tony's handsome youthful features. Quick as wink he played a tiny flash light upon the Mexican's face. "So, it is *you*, my son. I forgive you for running away from me in the woods. I was in a rage. I was not myself, not myself," he repeated vaguely.

"Whu-u!" Shy Beaver made a strangled sound that was a cross between amazement and laughter. "Go in. Tell outfit this your

father," he said. "Me watch. Tell Little Father we better go help Galland. This one loco some ways. Some ways him know."

Tony tethered the strange messenger's horse to a line of hitching rope which he had stretched across the kitchen and cleverly knotted off into divisions. Craig had instantly claimed previous acquaintance to the tall, weird black-coated man in the hideous mask; the acquaintance of one who owes another a lasting debt of gratitude.

The Unknown Messenger, however, had room, it seemed, for only one thought—the saving of his friend from a dreadful death. Demented undoubtedly, he had still retained the power of loyalty. Apart from the nature of the calamity which overhung Galland, Craig, who knew him best, had endeavored to draw from him the exact location of the rattlesnake den into which Galland was to be dropped at daybreak. The best he could win from the visitor was: "When the time is right my son and I will lead you there. My son knows where."

"See here, my son, come across with the information papa won't hand out," was Hal's chuckling plea to Antonio. Despite sympathy for the infirmity of the strange messenger,

there was an undeniably ridiculous side to his delusions.

"I am not his son even in that," Antonio said in a mock, discouraged tone.

"We'd best let him alone till around four o'clock. Then I'll tell him it's time to start. Don't get him stirred up, any of you, or he may forget about Galland and go racing off," was Norton's advice to his companions. "I'm going to talk to him a little the way I used to chin with 'a big French trapper I knew who was off in his upper story."

It was impossible to return for even a brief sleep after the stirring events of the evening. The Long Trail Boys busied themselves with a general going over of firearms prior to what might be a bloody fight. Gam, Craig, and the Unknown Messenger had neither revolvers nor guns. Norton had an extra revolver besides the pair he carried. He let Craig have the revolver. Hal loaned Gam one of his pair of fine blue steel revolvers.

"Hanged if I wouldn't let Demon-face have one of my guns if I thought he wouldn't make a mistake and shoot me with it," George declared. "I hate to see him without a rustler-popper." Finally deciding to specialize with his revolver, he offered the visitor his rifle.

"I thank you." The weird stranger's tones registered an odd but unmistakable satisfaction. He accepted the gun eagerly. So far as the real man was concerned, they could tell little about him. He had made no move to take off the painted black velvet mask. Only a pair of bright eyes glittered darkly through the eye holes, and a straight slit, all but concealed by the red painted mouth, afforded an opportunity to breathe.

"It is time!" For half an hour the stranger had been sitting silent in one of the large chairs, his grotesquely painted head supported by both hands. "We must start now. At once." He rose and made a gesture of authority.

"He certainly knows where he's at," was Norton's murmured words to Craig. "It's just about an hour yet until daylight. This fellow has been some big man of affairs before he lost his mind. He still has more sense than the average man."

As quietly as they could, the rescue party led their ponies out of the house and mounted them. As they were about to take the rescue trail Craig found himself riding beside the Unknown Messenger.

"Have you the brass key still?" the latter inquired curiously.

"Yes. It will not unlock any of the doors here," Craig returned with a slight smile. "You told me the night you helped me that I was the only one who could use it."

"Yes. It is not for these doors. It is the key to Bolden's stable," was the calm affirmation. "Bolden cannot get into his stable without it unless he pulls it down stone by stone."

"He can't!" Craig could hardly credit such a statement, particularly from an insane man. "Can't he get into it by a window?"

"No. The windows are high up and but small square openings. The stone blocks of the stable are fitted to form them. They cannot be easily made larger. As for the key. There is no other key or lock like it. It was made by a robber locksmith who was one of Bolden's men, and a genius. Bolden has tried to have a duplicate key made that would fit the lock. He has not succeeded. Serapis cannot go out of the window. Bolden will not tear down his stable, and you hold the key of the stable door. This is as it should be, for Serapis is yours. I know this, only I have forgotten your name. I have heard Bolden say it. Serapis I know from one who is gone forever."

"Was it Señor Crespero? He who was also el Halcon?" questioned Craig interestedly.

"You know from whom you bought Serapis," was the sole response the other man made, and in a stiff, displeased tone. Craig decided that he might learn more by asking no questions of his strange companion. He seemed to resent them.

The Unknown Messenger, for all he had grandly announced that "his son" would lead the way, had placed himself at the head of the little rescue party. The Long Trailers soon found their route an easterly one across the broad meadowland. They had not ridden before in this direction and now kept a bright look-out for signs of roving bands of rustlers. Their guide had already informed Craig that they were riding in the direction of Bolden's ranch.

Though it was still dark, it had now passed that darkest moment before dawn. The veil of night was breaking away from the morning sky. Ahead of them across the meadow they saw the dim outlines of a rocky ledge where the foothills above sloped down into the valley. Every pair of eyes strained eagerly through the lifting darkness. All were on the watch for signs of Bolden's rustlers going

about their terrible business. Neither Norton nor Craig had been able to extract from their touchy visitor any information concerning the number of rustlers they might expect to find at the rocky ledge.

"By George, Hal, I wish you'd try and get his royal nibs there to open up and let us know what we're in for!" Norton had ridden up beside Hal and was talking in the youngster's ear. "Tony could manage him if it wasn't for this confounded son delusion." Norton had to laugh despite vexation.

"I'll have a go at him." Hal sent Starlight up even with the stranger. The demented man's gaze was fixed on the rocks.

"They are coming now with him," he said as though alone. "I can hear them."

"Betcha you can." Hal spoke with a heartiness which he meant. He understood this greenwood nomad. "Do they make much noise? How many do you suppose are with Galland? Wish I could hear like you."

"If you had taken care of your ears when you were young you might be able to hear well, too," was a reply that nearly collapsed Hal. "They always make a noise, black-hearts that they are. Not more than half a score of them will be with Bolden to see

Galland die. I have arranged that." The tones from behind the mask grew slightly pompous.

"What was it you did? I ought to know, but——"

"How ought you to know when I did not tell you?" The voice was scornful now. "Now I will really tell you."

Again Hal swallowed the desire to whoop at being thus caught in his own trap.

"I left a jar of wine which I took from Bolden's house where the rustlers surely would find it. Bolden will give them nothing to drink, though he has a wine cellar. So I left temptation for them. Now while a few go with Bolden to torture Galland, the others will go to the ranch for wine. I have lain hidden in the woods and heard them talk. They think they will steal the wine and come back to their camp quickly. But they will drink in the cellar, and forget. Then either Bolden will come and kill them, or another will come. There is another to come. He has come before in this country to kill rustlers. I know not his name. I only remember there is such a one."

He trailed off again into a maze of comments in which Hal could find no rationality.

He had heard enough, however, and hurried back to Norton with it.

Within two or three minutes after Hal had repeated the crazy man's words to the guide, the riders saw first one, then three more shadowy figures suddenly come up above the rocky ledge which was growing more distinct in the graying dawn. Next appeared two men carrying a bound form by the head and feet.

"S-s-s-see!" The Unknown Messenger hissed like an enraged anaconda. "We are in time. Thank God."

For an instant no one spoke. There was that in the demented man's "Thank God" which gave them a flashing understanding of his truly noble nature.

"They haven't seen us yet," Hal murmured. "Aha! There he is! My meat. Only he doesn't deserve a decent bumping off by the bullet route." Hal thus vengefully hailed sight of the tall, lean figure of Bolden with his tiger face and air.

"Whiz-z-z!" A bullet fanned Antonio's cheek and sped harmlessly into the ground. The rescuers were now within a hundred yards of the rocks. They held their fire, however, awaiting Norton's signal. In that brief moment before rising to their own defense a

shower of bullets fell around them without casualties.

"Give it to 'em," clicked out Norton. "Aim to disable; not to kill. Let the state have 'em."

The rescue party fired one volley, then swept forward upon the rustlers and their captive. Three of the outlaws fell. Another clapped a hand to his shoulder while still another's rifle fell nerveless from a fractured wrist. Four of the others stopped to fire but one more round of bullets, then dashed away from the fatal ledge. Bolden and one man alone stood their ground. Partially protected by rocks, they dodged about the ledge until they regained the point of their first appearance. Suddenly both disappeared. From the point of Bolden's vanishing came a farewell spiteful rifle crack. The Unknown Messenger, who had shown himself a good marksman in the fight, threw up an arm to his masked face and pitched headlong from the saddle.

CHAPTER XX

"MY SON"

"**H**E'S gone! Let us chase him!" Hal shouted his frantic plea at the guide. He was wild to be on the vengeance trail of Bolden.

"No. Stay here. I need you and Tony to help me with Galland while David and Kent look after this fellow here. I'm afraid our Unknown Messenger has given us his last message." Norton cast an anxious glance at the long black form with its grotesque head now resting against Shy Beaver's arm. Shy Beaver was again acting as medicine man.

"H-a-a-a-a-a-! Ho-o-o-o-o-o!" The boys sent up a sudden clamorous shout.

Out upon the meadow, from behind a low-lying thicket near the ledge two riders now appeared. They were urging their ponies with spur and whip in their headlong flight across the meadow.

"We'll not get you today, you fiend. But tomorrow. *Betcha*," Hal predicted with emphasis. While he let his eyes follow the fleeing ponies and their riders, they seemed to

disappear momentarily in an odd black blot. His wonder grew as the blot widened and broke into curious black ripples. Then it seemed to draw together again.

"He-l-p-p-p-p-p! Help-p-p-p-p-p!" A frantic cry reached the Long Trail outfit, terrible in its despairing agony. "Help-p-p-p!"

"*Mi madre!*" came in a sighing breath from Antonio. "It is the peccary. These riders have stumbled upon the herd while it slept. And we can do nothing but keep far out of their way. So the peccary got Bolden after all. He was for them; something worthless to tear up."

"Good night! I never heard you talk about your worst enemy like that before." Hal regarded the Mexican in mild amazement.

"He was the one I hated since a *muchacho*," Antonio said with grave stress. "He was the man who killed poor Salus. Now I am not sorry the peccary got him. I saw his face this morning and knew it again."

"They certainly know how to get into action." Norton gave an involuntary shudder. Horror of the outlaw's terrible death had gripped him. He and Hal and Tony were now at the top of the ledge. Norton dropped down on the ledge beside the trussed form of

the Texan. "Good Heavens!" he ejaculated in an excess of loathing. He had glanced down into the rocky ravine below the ledge. It was of sandstone and a natural quarry. There was ledge upon ledge, from a foot to a yard wide, projecting the sides of the quarry. On almost every ledge were coiled rattlers. They were twined together in bunches, coiled or stretched full length upon the rocks.

Norton sprang up and dragged Galland from the perilous ledge. Bolden's last hurried act had been to give the bound Texan a forward shove calculated to overbalance him and thus send him over the quarry's edge into the snake den. Haste had frustrated his murderous intent. As the guide lifted the Texan to a sitting position, having quickly cut his bonds, Galland's eyes opened. He had been unconscious when Norton picked him up.

"Just in time. I hoped he would deliver the message," the Texan said feebly. "It was to be the rattler's den for me, or else sign over my birthright. I had intended to die rather than let Bolden have what he wanted most, the brag that a Bolden had won the fight. Where did he go? He would have killed you all. I hope he is dead." The hate of the Gallands, brave men, nursed for generations against the robber Bolden, still lived.

"He is dead," Norton said briefly. "You'll hear all about him as soon as we've made you comfortable. The Unknown Messenger has been hurt. We are going to take you to him now. He lies at the foot of the ledge."

"I can walk. Let me go to him." Galland struggled to his feet agitatedly. "You can't know how dear a friend he has been to me,—though I have never seen his face. I have only known him masked. Poor fellow. And he only tried to help me."

The Texan insisted on walking the short distance to where the grim black figure lay. The boys shook hands warmly with Galland. But he had eyes only for the still form on the grass. In order to give him first-aid treatment, Shy Beaver had removed the grotesque mask. The pale, straight-featured face was that of an aristocrat. A thick wave of hair as dark as Galland's own was thrown back from a high, intellectual forehead.

Without a word the Texan came forward and knelt beside the unconscious man. He took one of the strong brown hands in his own and said softly, as though in a dream, "My father." Then he bowed his head in an attitude of prayer.

"The Long Trail Boys' hats came off rever-

ently." Then they drew off a little, leaving father and son together.

"Can you beat it?" George murmured. "*This* is the queerest stunt we've seen pulled off yet."

"All I hope is that our friend Um" (thus had Hal nicknamed the Unknown Messenger) "knows his own son. Ugh. Hurt bad?" He turned to Shy Beaver.

"Naw. Take off some skin. Big shock. Bullet no there. Well pretty soon."

Shy Beaver's diagnosis of "big shock" came true in an unusual sense. An hour after Galland had wonderingly claimed the masked man as his father, Harvey Galland returned to consciousness and reason. His first words as his dark eyes met the face of his son were, "Well, Philip, I thought you would be back before now." While his mind still wandered, his power of recognition had returned.

Later in the day, when he had been established at Craig's ranch house on the leather couch, with his son in devoted attendance upon him, the remembrance of his own disappearance from his home returned. He had been on a trip to St. Louis and while there had been shanghaied. He had been carried away to a little village on the lower Mississippi and

had completely lost his memory. After years it returned a little and he had found his way to Texas again. There he had spent years of wandering about in the woods, with occasional rare flashes of memory of a lost son. He had become a veritable greenwood god and had looked to forest and field for sustenance. In his irrational state he had believed himself to be a secret messenger and had hidden his identity behind the curious demon-faced mask he had made for himself. He had been both feared and shunned by Bolden and his rustlers.

The outfit, with the exception of Shy Beaver, had circled the couch at the Gallands' invitation to hear the story of Harvey Galland. Shy Beaver had troubles of his own. He was more worried at the non-appearance of White Shadow than he would admit. Always a law unto himself, while the others talked with the Gallands he had faded stealthily away on a scouting tour of his own. Once out of the house, he steered a cautious course toward the Bolden ranch. He had heard the Unknown Messenger's prediction: "There is another to come." He had hoped it might be White Shadow and had resolved to go to the ranch.

He had come within a few hundred yards of

the Bolden ranch and reined his pony in beside a clump of concealing scrub oak when the one thing he had hoped for happened. The sudden reverberating reports of rifles rent the still evening air. He had seen no sign of human life either in the house or about the yard. His leathery old face wrinkled into a triumphant smile as the crash of breaking brush, followed by a company of riders in hot flight, told its own story. On past the house and into the grounds the desperate flight continued while behind the rustlers and at their very heels rode White Shadow and his scouts.

It was over in a little while. Without Bolden, his men were not notable fighters. They soon fell into panic and tried to escape. White Shadow's men went about tethering their prisoners in their usual systematic manner while the great chief and Shy Beaver welcomed each other.

That night Craig's house was the scene of a banquet on a large scale, at which Gam and Georgie Fu covered themselves with glory as cooks. It was one of the happiest reunions the Long Trail outfit had ever given and the presence of the reunited Gallands added happiness to the occasion. It seemed to the boys that nothing could have been more

wonderful than the strange reunion of the Gallands after so many years of sorrow and stress.

"By Christmas, it's going to be Mexico for this outfit before many days, isn't it, Boss Norton? Isn't it, Boss Craig?" was Hal's eager proposal as they sat in the sitting room around a bright fire which the boys had built in the old fireplace.

"Yes, I guess we might as well go on over the border. White Shadow has something good to tell us, so he says. About the trip, I mean."

"Go ahead, Emperor," urged Hal.

"*Manaña.*" White Shadow answered with a smile.

What White Shadow had to tell the Long Trail Boys "*Manaña*" will be recorded in the story of their Mexican trip under the name of "The Long Trail Boys and the Mysterious Fingerprint."

THE END

